

Sweet Nothin'

by Mayu Isabelle Uno

(with gratitude to Martha and Ells, without them there wouldn't be a story xx)

The sun was setting softly when Deana pulled out of her driveway. Her old Ford, mocha-brown with stripes on the sides, was a mighty old thing, as her mother would often say, bulky and rusty and somehow screeching awfully despite its lightweight construction. Everyone would know, even old Miss Frickerman watching *Jeopardy!* on full volume in her stuffy living room when Deana would leave for work, rattling along Jefferson Drive. The nights were quiet, almost empty but she enjoyed this tranquillity. Halfway between Jackson and Montgomery, she turned on the headlights and fumbled for the lighter. Smoke filled her car in huge clouds, the tip of the cigarette glowing in reddish and amber. She glided past Maple Road, relentlessly flicking powdery-grey ash through the half-opened window into the breezy night. The air outside smelled of pine needles, of freshly cut wood and last afternoon's downpour of rain. Deana wound down the window a bit further, letting the cold wind tousle gently her pinned up hair. Thirty minutes and four cigarettes later, the flashy neon sign of Jerry's diner flickered in the distance. Stepping out of her car, Deana ran her fingers over her baby blue uniform, her starched apron. She took great care in looking after her work attire, ironing out creases and washing out any ugly coffee stains from her previous shift. Upon entering through the backdoor into the kitchen, a hand waved, then gestured through the serving hatch towards the front. Deana waved back.

"Calm night, Deana. Only two customers, and one's just left."

"Thanks, Ted."

She walked on, past Ted in his checked pair of slacks, sweating and fiddling about the steaming stove. Strips of bacon, fried eggs and freshly cut burger patties were sizzling on the greasy hotplate. In the corner on a trolley, a tray full of bagels, round and glossy, was cooling down.

"Any open orders?"

"Number 14 and 18, will be 10 minutes."

Deana nodded and proceeded to the front, through the wooden swing door, her shoes tapping lightly on the dull tiles. The diner was empty indeed, the rows of worn leather sofas and wooden tables, deserted and still, gleaming wearily under the low-hanging, yellowish lights.

The college kids had left town last week already and on weekdays, hardly any high school freshmen happened to stray into the diner. Most seniors preferred the fancier ones in Jackson

anyway. The booze was more expensive but the parking lot was all the busier, the music louder, the air heated and ripe with promises.

“Deana, jeez you’re early.”

“Well, I guess. How was the night?”

Her colleague moved towards her, in her hands a tray with dirty plates, cutlery, some pieces of a broken mug.

“Some lady dropped this.”, and placing the tray in the sink, “Never seen her before.”

“Probably just a traveller passing through?”

“Probably.” Colleen smiled and pulled out a cigarette.

“I’ll take over.” Deana opened the tap. The water felt cold and harsh, and with a splash it hit the dirty plates underneath.

“Let me do this Deana, your shift’s not starting till half past.” The cigarette was dangling in her mouth, turning the paper red between her cherried lips.

“It’s alright. Go home. Hank’s waiting, ain’t he?”

Colleen looked up, their eyes met in between the overhead light and Ted’s curses from the back.

“You’re an angel, Deana. You know that?” Colleen reached under the counter, took her bag and was already on her way out when she poked her head out of the supplies rack. “Oh, and Deana. That lady, she forgot somethin’. I put it in the cardboard box next to the pencils on the counter.”

Then she left, waving and leaving only wisps of smoke behind. It hovered quietly near the ceiling but soon disappeared in nothingness. Deana faced the windows looking across the parking lot and dipped her fingertips into the soapy warm water. It had begun to rain, sometime in between entering the kitchen and talking to Colleen. A calm, soothing rain it was, cutting gently through the late summer air. The street in front of the diner was glowing in the darkness, glittering with whirls of bright neon colours dancing on wet concrete. Upon glancing across the room, her eyes wandered from table to sofa to table, over to the two young girls in the corner, whispering and giggling in low voices, and back to the counter again. The small cardboard box caught her eye, lying there somewhat displaced and awkward. Deana dried her hands, and positioning herself in front of it, she peered inside. Her eyes widened, her mouth opened, formed to a silent shriek. Carefully, she reached into the box, picked up the curious object and placed it onto her damp palm. The gloss paint was worn away but it still showed its original paintwork, the blues and purples, the golden inscription. *Welcome to Fairview*. The resemblance was uncanny.

“Deana!” Ted was hollering from the back. She looked up, folding her fingers over it and slipping it into her side pocket.

“Comin’.”

He stood at the back of the kitchen, leaning with crossed legs on the kitchen counter and chewing a Wrigley’s.

“Somethin’ wrong?”

“No, of course not.” Deana shook her head and tried to smile. With a tray full of piping hot food, she returned to the front and served the two young girls. Their faces were almost touching, giggling and laughing, when she approached their table. With a start they straightened up when Deana placed the tray onto the table top. She could feel their cheeks glowing, radiating the heat of the summer, radiating their youth.

“Here you go. Anythin’ else?”

They shook their heads, their young faces smiling sheepishly.

“I’m over there if you need me.”

Deana returned to the counter, placed the tray on its surface and sat down at one of the empty tables next to the windows. She reached into her pocket, pulled it out, and held it gently in her hand. The resemblance was uncanny. The keychain looked peculiar in her palm, like an artefact from a long-lost life. Tilting it in her hand, it rolled to the left, to the right, its colours looking dull under the yellowish lights. The silvery chain was scratched and worn but still intact.

The night they won it at the country fair, it had rained, just like tonight. The square was sparkling in neon blues and pinks and purples from the dazzling lights of the carousels and roller-coasters going round and round at full speed. It smelled of fresh popcorn, of corn dogs and cotton candy, but above all it smelled of youth, of laughter and the last summer vacation they would spend together, Mary-Louise and her. They were inseparable since their mums had decided to be friends, living across the street from each other, going to church on Sundays and having luncheons on Saturdays in Fairview. Dee and Mary-Lou were three then and growing up, they had shared toys, secrets, their lives with each other. They never knew it differently or wished it to be otherwise. At primary school, Miss Callaway always mistook Dee for Mary-Lou and Mary-Lou for Dee. It was a little game they played, over and over again. And even later at High School, they called each other Sissy and Sis.

That night at the fair, they each had a go at the tin can knockdown. Dee missed twice but Mary-Lou, with her firm grip and steady hands, won all three rounds. She could have gotten it, the big prize, that plushy, brown teddy bear she had been eyeing all night. But she shook her head and pointed to the two keychains hanging on a peck in the far-left corner. Dee and Mary-

Lou could not help but giggle, all the way from the fair back home. *Welcome to Fairview*. Mary-Lou wanted to leave, wanted to join a travelling dance group. Her mother was beside herself, but she was a good dancer, Mary-Lou. Before they said goodbye, they held hands, standing in the street and swearing to always remember and never forget. They hugged one last time, holding on tightly, breathing in the scent of pinkish cotton candy that still hung about them. Then Dee watched Mary-Lou, skipping and dancing across the street, turning round and round, her skirt following each of her light steps. Back inside, each in their rooms, they switched on the lights, three times, waved to each other through the windows and went to sleep. The next morning, Mary-Lou was gone.

Deana's chain broke apart years ago and the little pendant went missing with it. She looked for it in every nook and corner, under her car seat, in the parking lot, at home. It didn't hold any keys for a long time and soon after, Deana forgot about it. But now she held its twin in her hands, with its chapped gloss paint and worn chain.

"Sorry, could we get two milkshakes? Chocolate?" The two girls were waving from the corner, smiling.

"Oh, yes, -. Yes, of course." Deana leaped up and headed for the supplies rack in the back.

"I'm just gonna get some chocolate powder, and then I'm gonna fix you those drinks." She ran her fingers over her apron and disappeared behind the shelves.

"Ted, do you know where-."

The front door opened with a swoosh and closed shut again, the little golden bell above the doorframe ringing faintly but cheerfully. Light steps approached the counter, the heels tap-tap-tapping on the dull tiled floor, almost skipping, no, dancing across the room. An umbrella was leaned against the wall, hands were placed on the counter. Then, there was a voice, echoing in the empty nothingness, sweet and low. The next thing Dee knew was that she smiled.