

Excerpt

Purity Sweets

Rosemary Sullivan walked away from the front desk of the Purity factory and I wanted to run after her. She wore a soft sweater that constrained her rounded shoulders and a regimented blue apron over it, tied tight at her back, like a bridle on a horse.

“I have a package for Mr. James McGrath, foreman,” I had said, as I laid my eyes on her for the first time in my life, moments before.

“Hey you,” she said. “Aren’t you Donna Malone’s brother Stephen? My, full of yourself aren’t you?”

And I suppose I was – full of myself. Full of myself for having what my friends thought of as the only trinity of things required for happiness: a job, a car, and a girl. The job was delivering packages for the Newfoundland Post Office, the car was a 1936 Nash Sedan that had been a steal at two-hundred, and the girl was Jennifer Seveyar, a sensible bird-like girl, with a good name and good prospects. Jennifer Seveyar worked in her father’s music store, and she played Sundays at the United Church; her fingers were always precisely applied to delicate things: soft keys in demonstrations of God’s grace, the pouring of tea for company, or demonstrating the difference between a Steinway and a Heintzmen to St. John’s elites and their young debutantes.

I was still staring at Rosemary’s nametag when she said:

“Hello, are you deaf?”

“Yes I am, now can you take my package to Mr. James McGrath.”

“Yes, I am deaf, yes I am full of myself, or yes I am Stephen Malone?”

“All of the above,” I answered, “do you know what to do with this package?”

“Sure, Mr. Malone, I will take it to Mr. James McGrath, do you know what it is you have for Mr. James McGrath, there, Mr. postman-in-training with the funny hat?”

“You think my hat is funny? It’s British, Anthony Eagan.”

“You think you will tell me what’s in the package?”

“It’s against the rules for me to know what’s in the package, mam,” I replied with authority.

“Do I look like your mam?”

“No, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then why did you say it? See you now” she said with a gigantic smile, without giving me a chance to reply. It was then she walked away from me, package on her hip, my heart beating out of my chest.

That night I took the Nash and drove to see Jennifer after cleaning up and putting on my good navy coat. I checked the blackout times posted on the fridge, and based upon this information told Mom that I’d walk.

Outside, the stars seemed brighter than usual, on blackout nights they always were. So I decided to drive, lights off, through the deserted streets. It was like flying, the Nash handling corners and floating over the hills like a British Spitfire on a secret mission, undetected. I landed the car a block down from Jennifer’s.

“Stephen, so nice to see you,” she said, kissing me in the way she always did. We went to see *The Sultans Daughter* at the Nickel. She kept looking away when the belly dancers appeared and the evil sultan smiled. I’d been seeing her once a week for about two months, when I could afford to go out. We went either to a movie, for a walk, or to visit our mutual friends, Bob and Cecelia. I had first met Jennifer at the Commodore Club. Like most people, she went to the Commodore to watch American Servicemen and their ways. Though she was initially disappointed to find out I wasn’t a yank, she agreed to dance, and later, to go out with me.

After *The Sultans Daughter*, I suggested we go look at the shops, and she said

“You know I like your company, but I need to be home by ten and there’s not much going on with the blackout.”

When I got home everyone except dad was in bed. He sat in the living room chain-smoking and staring into space as usual. I chocked the stove with wood, said goodnight, and got to bed. The only son, and the oldest in the family, I got a room of my own. Tiny as it was, it was my own. Sleep felt hours away. The wallpaper was a faded black, with red and gold stripes, and I was sick to death of it. I closed my eyes and tried to think about all the positive things that recent days and months had brought me. I saw only Rosemary’s blue eyes, cheeks flecked with acne, hair that fell straight down to reveal her ears, an apron wrapped around her strong body, her knock-down smile as she

took the piss out of me. I tried to stay quiet as I pictured her dressed as the Purity girl, the one in ad's all around town and in the paper:

Here she comes with a package your favorite cookies, Purity cookies!

When Jennifer first came to tea at our house a week later, my mother pulled out all the stops.

"Let me get your coat," she said. I'd never seen her take any one's coat except the priest, and she did that because it was expected.

"Would you like a Wynola?"

"Oh, no thanks, they say it's bad for the skin," said Jennifer.

"Oh really?" Mom replied.

"Mrs. Malone, these sweets are for you."

"Oh thank you, my, they're expensive looking!" Mom said, "Peter, this is Stephen's new friend, Jennifer, say hello." Dad looked up from his newspaper for a second and grunted something. The headline read *Allies Pushing into Siegfried Line...*