

Getting Stood Up

by Andrew O. Dugas

When Paul first arrived, the bar was crowded with happy hour office workers, good-looking people shouting to be heard, loosened ties, stray hairs coming undone. He wondered about hookups and affairs, flirtations and desires getting stirred up by alcohol and mood lighting.

Paul combed the crowd carefully, but Julie was not among them.

He checked his phone again. No message, no text, and he had five solid bars, perfect reception. He reread the email. This was the right day, right time, right place.

All her choosing.

A seat opened up at the bar and he took it, ordering a Stella.

By seven-thirty, half the crowd and most of the women had cleared out.

At seven-forty-five, two hours and fifteen minutes after the appointed time, he gulped down the last warm bit of his third Stella and headed toward the door.

"Stood up, huh?"

He glanced back casually, in case the comment wasn't intended for him. A brunette with wild curly hair looked at him from her perch on a stool. A frilly white collar poured out of her black vest. She was maybe forty, well maintained, a little heavy on the cosmetics.

"Excuse me?"

"Somebody stood you up, right?" Her eyebrows lifted.

"Well..." He stopped. "What makes you think that?"

She slapped the bar. "I knew it! Sal!" She shouted to the bartender and by extension, the entire establishment. "Stood up! I told you! That's two more well drinks you owe me! Two more! Write it down!"

She laughed and patted the stool next to her. "Come on. That's one for me and one for you. I'm Lisette. Now come on and drink with me."

His mouth opened to say No thanks, but the words refused to come out.

"Oh, come on! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to embarrass you. We're all family here. Right, Sal?"

Sal, who had the look and paunch of an aging ball player, did not look amused.

"Sorry, I need to confirm the results." Sal turned to Paul. "Is it true that you got stood up?"

"Yes."

"Business or pleasure?"

"What?"

Sal set two meaty hands on the bar and leaned across. "Was it a romantic date or a business thing?"

"Well, it was supposed to be romantic."

"Supposed to be?"

Lisette sighed. "Come on, Sal. She didn't show, or it would have been romantic, right?"

Sal shook his head. "Let me ask this, you two work together, you and this woman?"

"No. We're in the same building, not the same company."

"See? See? Now how about those drinks?"

Sal's gaze stayed on Paul. "And you met her how?"

"There's a Peet's in our building. I'd see her there sometimes. Once a couple of months ago, it was crowded and she asked if she could share my table."

"Uh-huh. And this drink date tonight? Who set that up?"

Lisette gaveled the bar with her drink. "Immaterial! I think the results have been confirmed. I got a gig at 8:30, so let's get those drinks moving."

Sal shook his head. "Whatever."

Lisette raised her hand. "Seabreeze for me, and for my friend..."

"Paul," he offered. "Another Stella, I guess."

"And a Stella for my new friend, Paul, here."

Sal skulked away and Lisette laughed. "He hates losing!"

"Do you always win?"

"Every time! I can read a face like nobody's business. I saw you nursing your beer and checking your phone all the time, so I knew you were waiting for someone."

"Sure, but could've been anybody. A coworker. Old buddy."

She shrugged. "Yes. No. Maybe. Everyone else in here, they're making jokes, got their ties all loosened, but not you. You look like you're on a job interview and the closest thing to a job interview in a downtown bar on a Tuesday evening would be a date."

Sal brought over the drinks. Paul fished into his pocket for some singles, but Lisette grabbed his wrist. Her hand was bony and fingers narrow, but very strong. The nails lacquered dark red.

"Don't, honey. No tips for sore losers."

Sal sneered. "You take the prize, you know that?"

"Get lost. My new friend Paul and I are having a conversation."

Paul shrugged and smiled. He'd never be able to come into this bar again. Not during Sal's shift anyway.

"Cheers!" Lisette clinked her glass against his bottle. They drank.

"You had a pretty good read on me. Very impressive."

Lisette shrugged. "Nah, it's like anything else. Anybody could do it with enough practice. But sometimes things don't fit right."

"Like what?" Paul asked and pulled on his Stella.

"Take you, for example. You don't look like the kind of guy to get involved with a married woman."

Paul nearly choked on his beer. He grabbed the tiny napkin and wiped at his mouth.

"Who ARE you? Jesus H. Christ!"

"I'm right, aren't I? Shit, I wish I could've made that bet with Sal! Five drinks for that one, easy."

"But how could you know? I mean, the tie thing and the phone, okay, but how could you tell she's, she's..."

"Married?" Lisette put her hand over his and rolled her eyes. "Oh, honey, please."

"Are you like a mind reader?"

She laughed. "Maybe you are." A business card materialized between her fingers.

He took it. A top hat, white-tipped black wand, and her name.

LISETTE LAURENT - MAGIC

"Wait, so you are an actual mind reader?"

"Honey," she shifted toward him and spoke softly, Seabreeze breath and perfume comingling. "I don't have to be a mind reader to know what you're thinking."

Lisette's fingers danced up his thigh, their grip landing just south of his business district.

Paul jerked upright. "Huh. Well. Um."

She leaned in close, her red lips parting into a smile, pointy tongue emerging like a turtle. An unruly curl made contact with his forehead and he flushed red.

"Your phone," she whispered. And just as suddenly she was leaning back, holding up his phone like the Queen of Hearts.

"What?"

"Your phone. While you were waiting for your date, you never once called or texted her to find out where she was, why she wasn't showing. Why all the discretion if she wasn't married?"

Lisette gulped back the rest of her drink and stood up.

"Well, new friend Paul, I've got to get to my gig."

"Where? I'd love to see your show." The words stumbled out his mouth. He could barely talk, and not just because of the Stellas.

"You're a sweet kid, but sorry, this is a corporate gig, a private event. I get to walk around and pull playing cards of jerks' ears all night."

She pulled on a black overcoat and fedora. She darted in and kissed his cheek. "Don't forget your phone," she whispered, and was gone.

Paul picked his phone off the bar. She'd punched in her number. A thrill ran through him and he smelled again her Seabreeze perfume breath.

The phone lit up and vibrated. His "date" calling, finally. He pressed Ignore and was disheartened to see that Lisette's number had vanished without a trace. He clicked this arrow and that icon, but to no avail.

Paul fished his pockets for her business card, but that too was nowhere to be found. So he separated out four singles and spread them on the bar.

"Thanks for the drinks, Sal!" he shouted. He wanted Sal to see the tip.

Looked like he'd be coming back here, after all.

