

Where Shall We Meet?

by Andrew Roe

She got stuck in traffic. She overslept. She ran into an old friend. The bus was late. The cat was sick and dying and had to be rushed to the vet. She got the directions wrong. She got the time wrong. She lost his phone number and therefore couldn't call him. And she was thinking of him, right now, at this very moment, scurrying like mad, desperate and frantic like in those dreams where you're late and trying to get somewhere but can't, not wanting to blow this opportunity, trying to make it to the café in time, the agreed upon place on Montgomery Street, three days after they met at the party of a mutual friend, introduced, everything aligning like so, finding themselves among a semi-circle of seven or eight people, the topic of conversation ranging from sucky jobs to public transportation horror stories to chemically dependent siblings, the participants dwindling from seven to five to three to just the two of them, a pleasant, natural reduction, the slow ballet of words and gestures, verbal disclosures and withholdings, discovering that they shared the same birthday (a sign!), loved Tom Waits and Kurt Vonnegut (another sign!), the night progressing and expanding like a movie and then ending with a kiss on the balcony, wine on her lips, smoke in her mouth, the taste of cucumber and mint and promise, phone numbers exchanged, the departing and subsequent night of restless sleep, a brief phone conversation the following day (because he couldn't wait, he called, he had to call, he said fuck it to that whole guy credo thing of waiting and making her wonder, and perhaps this was the beginning of the end, no?), him asking "Where shall we meet?" and her pretty obviously caught off guard by the suddenness, it was like coming too fast the first time, this rapid progression throwing her a bit and causing an epic pause, her eventually recovering and answering by saying, "Right, let me think, where would be a good place, you work downtown, right?" and the time and the place decided upon and but she said sorry but she had to go, couldn't talk (another sign?) and now he was waiting and sitting and reading a

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day-old newspaper, digesting sports scores and financial data he could give a shit about, waiting, not the first time he'd gotten his hopes up like this, sure, he was forty-three and single and saggy and increasingly aware that such encounters were rare and had to be handled carefully, handled like dried flowers or brittle fossils, and he waited, waited, for as long as he could before he finally stood up and felt his legs buckle and then stabilize and then start to move, exiting, he was walking now, leaving the café, the sidewalk filled with the lunchtime crowds, passing many women, checking to see if each one was her, could be her, or even someone else who could still make him believe and start all this again, and they, the women, all seemed to be scarved and beautiful and leaning into the wind, moving much too quickly for him to realize what he was missing.

