

Coffee

by Karen Swartz

I hate walking into restaurants and cafes by myself to meet someone. I always feel awkward, as if no one will claim me. I'm hanging on the threshold now for an agonizing few moments scanning the room until I see my friend.

"Hi!" she says, waving her cup at me.

"Hi."

I'm always flustered. Why can't I just be natural? Why does safety seem so fragile?

I order the first thing I can think of, because I get rattled when there are too many options.

"Have you heard from Lars?" she asks.

"Yes, he's in London doing research at the British Museum. Then he'll go to Cambridge. I get letters almost every day."

And when there isn't a letter I feel unmoored. I don't believe he misses me really. He doesn't need me, not the way I need him, to keep the world in place, to keep me from crashing.

"That's sweet. Will you go over?"

"No money. He has a grant, but I don't have enough saved, and no vacation."

And I would be alone there, while he writes and researches with that single-mindedness I admire. It sucks to feel deficient. I would hate

myself for not being bolder, for not setting my own course — Ireland, Scotland, the Hebrides, wherever. He would. He does. She has red hair, wavy red hair falling to her shoulders. I've always liked it, the way it glows in sunlight, how it springs against her cheek as she walks.

"How is Steve?" I ask.

Steve is a pill.

"We're going on a trip this summer..."

Ah, matters have progressed. How...established. Serene, she always looks so serene. It's hard to imagine her kissing Steve passionately, or undressing for him. The buttons on her blouse, would she undo them slowly, watching him, or

"That sounds great. I'm jealous."

She always dresses modestly. She barely shows any skin at all, except where the neckline of her shirt collar opens slightly. Her skin is so pale, with just the faintest flush. She wears a delicate necklace, so delicate, light as breath, light as a feather or a soft kiss. A soft kiss there in the hollow of her throat.

"So how's work?" I ask.

"Oh, I have a new project..."

She doesn't use her hands much when she talks. She keeps them folded on the table, or touches the handle of her cup slightly, turning it in the saucer, or moves the salt shaker. It's almost soothing. I imagine her hands are cool and that her touch is gentle.

"Do you want more?"

Shit. Idiot. You should have been listening.

"What?"

"Do you want more coffee?" And now I notice the server hovering impatiently.

"Sure. I guess."

But how many have I had now? My legs feel jumpy. She's never jumpy, never ruffled, never taken by surprise. I would like to.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to kick you. Um, what have you been reading?"

"I found this great novel..."

The third cup, or the tenth, I've lost count. Her eyes get very bright and lively when she talks about books. Green, with a ring of brown around the pupil. She has what I can only describe as a ladylike laugh, lips slightly parted, more a smile than a laugh. Lips slightly parted and I'm losing my way here

"You can borrow it when I'm done."

"Absolutely, it sounds great. Thanks"

She slips off her jacket. It is getting warm, even with the overhead fans. Her arms are bare. She reaches up to tuck her bra strap back under the fabric. Black lingerie and yes, she sees you staring you complete idiot.

"Have, um, have you seen that new movie. Maybe we could go."

"Sure, I'll ask Steve."

Goddam Steve to hell. Why did I drink so much coffee?

"You know, you should run away with me."

She stops dead in the middle of whatever she was saying, and then laughs. "Lars wouldn't like that very much."

She is, after all, used to this, though I doubt she knows I am slowly unbuttoning her blouse, which is warm from her skin and I'm pulling her close so that her glorious red hair falls across my face when I kiss her, and then

"Thwarted again," I say lightly.

I jump up so suddenly I bang my knee on the table and the cups rattle and several people turn around. "Ow. Sorry. I just need to go to the restroom. Too much coffee"

I stare at myself in the mirror. I look lifeless. I look futile. I feel flimsier than the airmail letters that Lars sends so regularly from England.

"I should go now. The stations near my place get sketchy at night."

"Well it was great to see you." She hugs me just long enough to demonstrate that she is open-minded yet inaccessible and smiles just a bit too much in her effort to be completely okay with me. If I were a man she would never speak to me again. Which just goes to show how insignificant a threat I am.

I walk off to catch the train. I turn the corner and as I pick up the pace I reach out my hand and drag my wrist across the rough brick wall. I can't stop shaking. I really should have skipped that last cup.

