

The Friend

by Melanie Yarbrough

She is walking to the café to meet her friend. Her friend is there already because she walked from where was getting her haircut. Her friend sent her a text message that said, “OMW” for “on my way” and then “Here!” two minutes later. Her friend is probably reading a book because that is what she does, or fiddling with her bangs and wondering if they are greasy because that is also what she does.

She has taken the wrong turn to get to the cafe and backtracks. She sends a text message relaying her delay and bumps into an elderly woman while she punches in the message. She is pretty sure, but not completely sure, that the old woman glares at her, probably thinking something about her generation and its disregard for others and arrogance. She hears this in her grandma's voice even though this old lady is a stranger.

She apologizes several times to the old woman: The first two are sincere apologies while the third is defensive, a bit angry. Why must the woman hold a grudge?

She is thus flustered as she approaches the café, which she has finally found. Her friend is sitting at one of the café's impossibly small tables, she sees through the window. Her friend is reading a book just as she suspected her friend would be doing. It is a small book with a bright orange cover. She thinks it is probably a book of short stories — her friend is always reading short stories, which she thinks is a waste of time — nothing meaningful can be communicated in just a few pages. The authors are just lazy, she believes. But these are things she would never say to her friend because her friend would take it personally. (Her friend is always taking things personally.) She stands at the window a while, watching her friend, who is still reading, leaning forward as if having trouble seeing the book.

Her friend has been waiting a while but she begins to think her friend really doesn't mind. She begins to fear her friend

would rather sit here alone with a book, leaning forward that way. She tries to remember the last time her friend leaned toward her that way while they had a conversation but can't.

A large woman bumps into her before entering the café. She thinks the woman is breathing hard. She watches the woman walk up to the counter, in her friend's periphery. Her friend, still reading, pauses and looks up at the very large woman. But her friend does not just look up the way a person might look at anyone passing by. Her friend looks up with expectation, as if to say something. In recognition. But immediately after, it is clear to her that her friend does not know the enormous woman. It occurs to her that her friend has mistaken this morbidly obese woman for her.

Her face flushes when she realizes this, and she wants immediately to go in and confront her friend about it. Her friend — who is always talking about fresh foods and how people who eat cows are more responsible for the state of the earth's climate than anyone else — sees her as overweight and unhealthy. She always — since college when they met — felt like her friend looked down on her, and now she feels it is clear where they stand. Her desire to confront her friend has dissipated and she pulls her jacket closer to her body and walks back home without making a wrong turn.

