

Nora and Paul at the Coffeeshop

by Peg Alford Pursell

"The usual?" the barista asked Paul. She tucked her hair behind her ear and smiled at him.

Nora wasn't sure she'd heard correctly — the usual? — but Paul's flushing face confirmed that was right. He refused to meet Nora's eyes and fumbled at his pocket for his wallet. A spike of anxiety coursed through Nora. "I'll get us a seat," she said, and found them a booth in the back.

Nora sat and brushed grains of sugar off the table. She pictured the girl's face again, how it had brightened when she'd seen Paul. When had he found time to come here? Where would he have told Nora he was going? She searched her mind, went backwards through the days since the coffeeshop had opened at the end of their street. How delighted they'd been then — they would walk up together mornings, they'd said. Lunch sometimes; the café offered just the right menu. So far, they'd been there just once before. Together. Now it was evident Paul had been sneaking up here himself all along.

And just where was he now? Beside her two noisy children slipped out of their booth and began chasing one another up the aisle. Nora looked over at their mother who was deep in conversation on her cell phone. Nora kept her eyes on the woman, who surely must feel the weight of Nora's attention. The mother seemed aware of her focus but studiously avoided looking her way. It was a problem of some sort. Nora was becoming invisible. The woman tapped a dark plastic stirrer on the tabletop in front of her to emphasize something she was saying.

Now here came Paul carrying a tray with two coffee mugs and a small plate of pastries. Wisps of steam hovered over the white cups. And here was the little girl dashing, not looking, straight into Paul's

legs. He tried to recover the tray — it was obvious how he tried — but too late. It all happened in a moment that stretched on agonizingly long — the hot coffee pouring over the child, her face, the screaming, Paul going down at the last, mugs cracking on the stone tile, the little boy standing stock still in the aisle.

“What have you done?” screamed the mother. “My God! What?” but the woman was looking at Nora. At Nora, as she wailed.

