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THE DATE

Although Alice was by no means a shy woman, she did not typically engage in sustained conversation with strangers. She had been friends with the same group of people for years and years and felt no need to make new ones. She was the sort of person who created her life around routines. She had the same thing for breakfast each morning: oatmeal with apples cut into it and coffee. She ate at a few favorite restaurants, dressed in a limited palette of colors, always drank the same wine, and bought the same brand of laundry soap.

Alice worked as a financial analyst and found a certain satisfaction in making calculations and keeping records straight. She believed women needed to take care of themselves because they could not expect anybody else to; she lived within her means and saved for retirement; she ate balanced meals. From the outside she did not seem very brave or adventurous and perhaps she was not, but people who would pass these judgments (her younger sister, who loved traveling) have forgotten that for many people it is a formidable task simply to keep one's life in order, to arrive as agreed at the office five days a week in clean slacks and a pressed blouse, to keep the rent paid and the kitchen clean, and Alice, now in her mid-thirties, had been doing these things since she left home at eighteen and was proud of herself.

She had ceased dating years ago, after being devastated twice by older men—both had claimed to find her enchanting, to be intoxicated with love; one abruptly and without explanation changed his mind, and the other had simply disappeared. Later her friends had sometimes tried introducing her to acquaintances from work or cousins in from out of town, but nothing ever developed from these introductions, and after a time they, too, subsided. Alice had thin lips, blue eyes, and skin so devoid of color that it looked bleached. Her hair was an unremarkable ashy brown with a few jagged strands of gray, like cracks in a pavement. On certain occasions men noticed her (usually they were drunk), but most of the time they did not, and Alice did not waste time thinking about

them. She had a cat and did not think of herself as lonely.

Then one evening she caught a man watching her. She was dining in a cafe, the one she went to on Wednesday evenings, after her volunteer work playing with sick children at the hospital. She had finished her meal and was sipping her coffee and watching people out the window. It was near Christmas, and the shops smelled of pine and cinnamon and cranberry. One saw soft little lights, like candles on cake. The world was festooned with velvet bows and gold bunting. It seemed to be a time of kindness, riches, and limitless possibility, of something like magic. Alice had done her gift shopping early and felt free to relax. She had with her, for reading, a section of the day's newspaper and also a letter from a friend in London, which she had unfolded and was reading leisurely, a little bit at a time.

She did not notice the man coming in—perhaps he had been there when she arrived; she only happened to glance up from the letter to find him looking at her. He was younger than she, dressed casually in jeans and a tailored shirt, but all of a certain quality, hardly worn. He was neatly shaved and had a fine watch and clean, short fingernails—all this suggested refinement. His hair fell down thickly about his face; it needed a cut, but its unruly quality appealed to her. It spoke of recklessness. She noticed him watching and looked back for a moment, then down at her letter.

Reading a few more sentences, she found herself not taking them in at all but wondering whether he was still looking at her, feeling a strong compulsion to look again. She peered up quickly, met his eyes, and immediately moved her head to glance out the window, pretending that was where she had intended to look. She watched the figures passing by. But now she felt compelled to look again—she couldn't explain it, it wasn't exactly that he was handsome, but something of his refinement and his boldness in looking at her—before she could help it she was looking again. Now he smiled at her, lifted his eyebrows very slightly, as if to say, "I've caught you," and she looked down, reddening, undone. She knew now she would look again and again; he had locked her into a pattern; she had started down a road with no place to turn around and could only keep going ahead until she should have an opportunity to exit.

She looked without intending it. Aware that she was being watched, she lifted her coffee cup, almost empty, took a slow sip

and set it down again, her hand lingering on its surface. She looked at her watch only because it was a place to look, something to do. The time meant nothing. She smiled at him, realizing she enjoyed the flirtation. She wondered whether he would speak to her. She pretended for a few minutes to be absorbed in the letter.

But when she looked again to see him drinking from his cup while sustaining his gaze, she felt suddenly naked before him—and afraid. He could be crazy, a stalker—it was, at least, a possibility, and gazing out the window onto the street, she began to imagine what she would do if he were to follow her out. She might be able to board a bus and lose him. She imagined walking home on a circuitous route, or ducking into a shop, or stopping off at the police station. She was thinking of rising to exit. She peered at him.

He was still watching her. A piece of cheesecake had appeared on his table. She had ordered the cheesecake previously and knew it to be quite good; she smiled, remembering how it tasted, rich but not heavy. He smiled back at her. He looked away from her only long enough to cut into the cake with his spoon and lift a piece to his mouth. She watched as he opened his lips, closed his mouth around the spoon, and drew it out slowly. It was almost obscene. She could taste it herself. Her lips parted.

He swallowed, lowered the spoon, and, still gazing at her, took the coffee cup in both hands and lifted it to his lips. As if he had all the time in the world, as if he never had to be anywhere else again. They watched each other unabashedly now. She took a voyeuristic pleasure in watching him eat, and he wanted her watching, didn't he; he had invited this exchange with his endless gaze.

He looked away from her for just a moment, to lower his spoon again into the cake, and she felt a short feeling of relief followed by a breathless fear: she wanted him to look again. When he did look, both of them smiled. They looked at one another for so long that she felt she knew him. She watched him lifting the cheesecake to his mouth and drawing the spoon out. She felt herself becoming aroused, and suddenly it was too much; it was absurd; she was overwhelmed by a stranger who watched her as he ate dessert. It had to stop. Knowing he still watched her, she opened her purse, took out her wallet, and left enough cash on the table to cover the bill. She hastily folded the letter and stuffed it halfway into its envelope, then stuffed the letter into the purse. She drank the last

of the coffee in her cup. She had not intended to look at him again but she did. His hands were gripping the edge of the table, as though he was preparing to rise, and still he looked at her. She looked away without smiling. Moving quickly and deliberately, she rose from her seat and walked out.

But she sensed a movement behind her. She had planned the route she would take if he should follow her, but this involved crossing the street. The light was red. She looked over at the cars, keeping her back to the restaurant, but now he was standing in her line of vision. He was quite tall, much larger than he'd seemed sitting in the restaurant, and she had to look up to see his face.

"As I see it," he began, "I have two options." He sounded smooth, confident. "I would like to ask you to have dinner with me," he continued. "Or, I could ask you to marry me."

She began to laugh, taken by surprise. It was absurd, but she liked him. The light changed, and they began to cross the street together, which gave her a moment to think. It was lunacy, of course. She could see he really was young, twenty-four or twenty-five perhaps, and she thought he could not harm her. If she met him in a public place, she could avoid imminent danger and find out about him.

They reached the other side of the street. Stepping up onto the curb, he stopped and touched her arm. She looked up at him—there he was, looking as he had in the restaurant. "I could have dinner with you," she said. She felt she must be blushing.

"Is Saturday all right?"

"Yes, I think so," she said.

"That same place?"

"The same place."

"Is seven all right?"

"Eight is better," she said, for no reason other than to seem not too agreeable.

"What is your name?"

She thought about lying but immediately felt that would be wrong. "Alice," she said.

"Alice," he repeated, as though it was a foreign name he had never heard before. "Ron," he said with a nod, then, stepping away from her, "I'll see you Saturday."

She tried not to think about it during the week, in the same way she had, at first, tried to resist looking at him in the restaurant. It was just as impossible. She wondered who he might turn out to be. Not that she expected any sort of lasting relationship to come of it—nothing lasting ever did come, and besides there was his age to consider. "Or I could ask you to marry me." She ran the phrase over and over again in her mind, like a favorite song. He didn't, of course, mean it; he couldn't mean it, but it was the closest thing to a proposal she had ever received, and she wanted to play with it for just a little while, to pretend it might mean something.

On Saturday evening she told her sister and a neighbor in the apartment building, with whom she had grown friendly over a period of years, so they would know to call the police if she did not return, if he did turn out to be some sort of lunatic. She put on a black dress and pearls, felt it was too formal, and changed into a skirt and a pale lavender sweater that set off her eyes. A run appeared in her stocking, and she had to change into another pair. She put on some makeup, but deciding it looked garish, took cotton and baby oil and rubbed most of it off. She let her hair hang loose. Worried that their conversation might become awkward, she made a point of thinking of questions she might ask him to keep things going. What music did he like? Where did he go on vacations? What were his plans for Christmas? She had seen a few movies recently; perhaps he would have seen them as well. He would make her laugh. They might even share a dessert, a cheesecake like the one she had watched him eat. Afterwards they would walk over to the Hyatt and ride the elevator to the lounge at the top floor. They could have a drink in its lounge, with its view of the city lit up at night, always spectacular. Or they could ignore the view and watch each other.

She came in five minutes late. She felt disappointed at not seeing him immediately and walked to the rear of the cafe and back to the front again. "Two please," she told a waiter, and sat down to wait.

The waiter asked if he could bring her anything to drink. Although she wanted wine she said she didn't need anything, lest Ron think it rude she had started before his arrival. At the next table three women, all made up and wearing a good deal of

jewelry, laughed loudly and repeatedly about something that had happened to one of them. Everybody else seemed to be in pairs or groups, and Alice felt self-conscious and a little foolish. Whenever the door to the cafe opened she would glance up at it. She began to watch the other people as though some message or sign would be implicit in their actions.

She avoided looking at her watch. A dark teenager came and filled her glass with ice water. She lifted it to her lips, grateful to have something to sip on. She imagined Ron would arrive shortly with some apology for being late, some perfectly good excuse, a phone call or a missed bus. Then she began to worry that he might have some illness or emergency.

Another waiter came to ask if she'd like a drink. The suggestion seemed insulting. A man at another table met her glance and then a woman with very long hair—she wondered if they could see she was waiting for someone. She had never felt before that sitting alone in a restaurant, one called attention to oneself, but now she felt it strongly. She imagined everyone could see she was waiting for a man. The woman with long hair smiled sympathetically.

Each time the door opened and strangers appeared, it was like a small pebble being ground deeper and deeper into her skin. After about twenty minutes she felt she could bear it no longer and quietly got up, took her purse, and went to wait for the bus home. Standing on the street corner she looked for him among the passers-by, but when the bus finally came she felt relieved to ascend its steps, and, once seated, she closed her eyes and leaned her head against the window.

She was angry at him. "I didn't really expect it to go anywhere," she later told her sister on the phone, "but I thought it would last a little longer than it did, and it isn't fair that I should be denied a small pleasure like eating cheesecake with somebody." It seemed like a stupid thing, but that night in bed she even cried a little, just a little. Her fury at him rose not so much because he had failed to appear, but because in his gaze and his silly proposal he had pointed out to her how lonely she was. She hadn't missed it, hadn't felt any lack, but he had awakened something in her, and now she felt an aching hollow. It spread inexorably through her body, like a wave spreading out over the sand.

She passed by the restaurant a few times in the days that

followed, hoping to happen to see him. It was possible, after all, that he had some good excuse for his failure to appear, but had been unable to contact her. Several times she glimpsed a figure in blue out of the corner of her eye and turned quickly, but these figures always proved to be somebody else.

Christmas came, and then New Year's, and she distracted herself with family gatherings, outings with friends, the party at the office. Sometimes she stopped into the cafe and kept her eyes open for Ron, but she had little hope of seeing him. She told herself she was pleased that she had gone out to meet him that night, because otherwise she might spend the rest of her life wondering what might have happened. He would be wondering, possibly; he would never know whether she had been there waiting for him, but she knew, she had a kind of answer.

When she did see him again, she was caught off guard. Ten months had passed. He was not in the cafe at all but in a natural foods shop, holding several jars of vitamins. His hair was much shorter, and he had a suit on, and although she could not have recalled what he looked like she knew, when she saw him, that it was him.

"Ron?" she said. He looked up.

"You stood me up a year ago," she said. She hadn't meant to just blurt it out, without even a hello-how-are-you, but there it was, the accusation dangling before him like a rope.

"Beg your pardon?"

"You stood me up a year ago. We were supposed to have dinner in a cafe," she said.

"I'm sorry, but I don't remember," he said.

"You don't remember," she repeated.

"No. I'm sorry."

"Well," she said, uncertain how to proceed.

"If you'll excuse me," he said and went to speak to the woman behind the counter.

Why did he have to deny it? Why couldn't he simply say, "It's true; I did stand you up; I apologize; good-bye"? "Men are like that," her sister said, whatever that meant. Alice was well on her way to putting the incident behind her when, a few weeks later, she entered a Greek restaurant and saw Ron again. He was seated opposite a dark-haired, bony woman, closer to his age. She looked at him. Their eyes met briefly, and she told herself he must not see

that she was alone, must not see that she even remembered him. She turned her back and moved quickly to a table where a man, older, sat looking over the menu. She sat down opposite him.

He had thinning brown hair and a graying beard, rather thick eyeglasses and hairy wrists, and he had been tracing down the side of the menu with his fingertips, as though he were trying to read a table of data in very fine print.

"Excuse me," she said, setting her purse down on the floor, "but I just saw somebody I don't want to see, an old boyfriend, well not really. Not a boyfriend at all. I just saw somebody, and I don't want him to think that I'm alone, so would you mind if I just sat here for a few minutes and we could speak—if you could pretend you know me I would be terribly grateful. Please I'm sorry to bother you." She said all this very quickly.

The man looked at her for a very long time. Alice was afraid he would ask her to leave or that he would say he was expecting a friend. "Have you eaten here before?" he said finally. "I'm having trouble deciding what to order." They began to discuss the menu, and from there they spoke easily, comfortably. She looked back at Ron twice but he never seemed to see her, didn't think anything at all of her being there. She kept on talking with the stranger, even beginning to enjoy herself; but she was aware of Ron through the corner of her eye. At the back of her consciousness he lurked like a petty thief.