

Wait for Me

“Will you wait for me?” The whole evening seemed to build to that one request. As Trish said it, she seemed to exhale, then turn away slightly—as if her life could proceed again, whatever his reply would be.

“Oh, we’re in no hurry. I’ll be still sitting here when you get back.” For better or worse, Jack’s first impulse was to be glib. He had always loved to play with words. Little by little, he had gotten better at restraining himself; a moment of silence and reflection before speaking had done wonders for his relations, both personal and professional. He still remembered telling his best friend Kenny at his second wedding that he planned to come to all of his future weddings. Yet in moments like this, completely caught by surprise, he reverted to his old self.

He tried to recover, for her more than for him. He wanted to take his words back. But Trish rose from her seat and put her purse on the table. She glanced back at him, then walked away. He wondered if he had thrown away—he wasn’t sure what—thrown away an unexpected letter that told him that he won the lottery of life.

Trish was always a step ahead. When they met in high school, she ran sprints for the track team, which he managed. He admired her determination, and had a crush that he never revealed to anyone.

They went to different colleges, but kept in sporadic touch: holidays back home, July 4 town celebrations. He was surprised that she was married by 21—not so much that she got married, but that he never knew about the guy beforehand. Jack got a last-minute invitation to the wedding. She looked content. The groom looked lucky. Then it was two kids by 25, and Jack and Trish went off to their own worlds at their own speeds.

At the tenth high school reunion, Jack saw her again. She had an MBA and was rising in some software firm in California. He, on the other hand, was a late bloomer, he told Trish. After two years as a rising barista, had gone to grad school in linguistics—linguistics! How’s that for the slow track. After getting a degree, if he stayed at his university, the department would let him have a research position that involved, as he put it, “write down new words on index cards and keep the cards in a shoe box, until the box fills up, and then get another box.” So he spent his days reading newspapers and trade magazines, highlighting words and phrases never documented before. Once a year, he presented a paper at his subsection of the Linguistics Society of America—a

free trip to Minneapolis next January. His world was an acquired taste, and he happened to acquire it. He could be the life of the party, as long as the party favors are thesauruses.

He was surprised that she was interested and kept asking questions. She said that her firm was working on natural language software, that they could use someone like him in California. Think about it, she said. And a week later, Trish back at her California office and Jack back at his desk with a shelf stacked with shoe boxes, she called. "Thanks but no thanks," he replied. "But please ask me again some time."

They became e-mail friends. At late, late hours—after the kids were in bed, she would send a note, an update on work or family. Then after a silence of several months, she broke the news. She was coming back east with the kids. She left out any news on her husband. "Let's have dinner. I am staying with my parents, and they'll take the kids for an evening."

She had an offer to run the new office in Hong Kong. The company would pay for all her expenses, plus school for the kids. It would be 18 months, maybe two years. She wanted the chance to live overseas while the excitement was still there. This might be the last chance for a big adventure for a while. After that, she came to realize, it might be nice to slow down.

He wasn't sure about her. He had kept expectations low—mainly, he realized, because she never let him know what she thought about him. But now he knew. And now he needed to give her the benefit of opening himself in return.

Deep in his own spinning thoughts, his search for the box with the right words, he did not notice right away that she was back.

"Trish, ask me again. I've grown up in the past five minutes. Older, not any smarter, but maybe more thoughtful. So please, ask me again."

"I'm leaving in a few days. The timing's not great, but it's now or never. So, Jack... I was hoping that when I come back, well..." She inhaled and looked right at him. She reached over the table and took his hand. She gently rubbed his hand with her thumb. "Well, will you wait for me?"

All along, he thought that Trish had moved on. He never considered that she zoomed ahead, took a look at what was out there, and circled back—back to him. Now she wanted him to be her anchor while she went on one more adventure. She wasn't really

coming back, even if she believed it when she exhaled, that's what he thought to protect himself. But on the faint chance that he was wrong...

"Will I wait for you? I'll be sitting here when you get back. I've never been in a hurry."

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