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Not Coming, Ever

Expecting his wife to be late, Robert felt some satisfaction when he arrived at the mall and found no Annie. A friend had given her a ride to her class. She'd told him she would walk from there.

"I could pick you up. Are you sure?"

"I need the walk."

"Well," he had answered, "don't be late."

"See? I have my watch."

Robert remembered how she had held it up—as if it were a cunning pest she had finally succeeded in capturing.

He sat down on one of the metal-basket benches and watched the crowds. For a moment he thought he saw her. He rose, walked toward the woman, and stopped. No, that was not quite Annie. But he took the resemblance as a good omen: the universe, like a conjuror, was getting ready to produce his wife.

He returned to the bench. He was sitting where the mall made a right angle. He gazed down both of the broad corridors. She was nowhere.

Annie's not coming, ever. The thought was unreal, like the omen: a game he fell into whenever she was late. And she was always late. (Had she looked at her watch? Had she wound it?)

They had agreed years ago that, if either of them died young, the survivor should remarry. Robert thought of the desirable women he knew. All were unavailable. Indeed, several were married to his neighbors. There was one who looked like a girl he'd proposed to in college. He remembered the look she'd given him, like a recognition, the first time they'd met. He'd often wondered if he didn't look like somebody she'd known before, too. There didn't seem to be any way to ask about a thing like that.

Not every one was married. A Jewish girl with a luscious figure had started flirting with him while he was in graduate school—whistling at him once when they passed in the gym; another time, giving him an impromptu neck-rub while they were waiting for an elevator. She'd done this in spite of the new and prominent wedding ring on his finger. He

didn't know whether he'd been too terrified or too faithful to flirt back. Anyway, it hadn't mattered. She was a lesbian—everybody knew that—and she played this game with guys.

She'd worn halter-tops and cut-offs in the hot months. Robert believed he had a good idea of what she looked like naked: clear white skin, from her neck, over her full breasts, her belly, to the black pubic hair. He did not see her body as something he had merely imagined. He knew how her breasts must feel in his hands, her nipples caught gently between his fingers.

Then he saw a clock. Annie was thirty minutes late.

The information desk was a few steps away.

“Excuse me. I've been waiting for my wife and she hasn't showed up. I wonder if you could help me.”

“Yes?”

“I'm afraid she may have passed by and I didn't see her.”

“Well,” said the clerk, “what does she look like?”

“What does she look like?” he repeated.

The clerk casually said, “You know.”

“She's—” Robert began.

He brought up his hand, to gesture; and he kept it there, the fingers outspread, while he searched for a description.