



# Expectations

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A young woman walked briskly along a quiet, usually busy street. It wasn't yet time to go work. She had someplace to go; she was nearly there.

A younger man sat on a park bench, watching the young woman approach. His eyes lit up as she sat down beside him.

"Hi," said the young woman to the younger man.

"Hi. So, what did she think?" asked the younger man.

"She didn't say, Michael. It was real sudden, you know?" The young woman seemed agitated.

A breeze ruffled the fake fur at the neck of her jacket. The young man stirred and stood.

"I'm gonna get a coffee. You want some?"

She looked up at him, standing in the morning light.

"No."

He turned.

"Wait. Yeah. Um...regular with a shot of pecan, ok?"

Michael nodded and stuffed his hands deeply into his jeans pockets

and schlumped away toward their favorite coffee shop. Leah sat very still, staring at a hole in the pavement. Her face spoke of internal troubles. She watched a hardy insect slowly gain the top of the hole. She didn't hear the traffic on the street or Michael returning with coffee.

"Leah," said Michael, startling her out of her reverie. "Here." He shoved the cup of hot stimulant at her, spilling a bit through the small opening in the lid.

"Thanks." Leah fiddled with cup, rotating it back and forth between her small palms.

"So?" prompted Michael, "What do you *think* she thought?" He tapped his sneakers, staccato on the concrete under the bench.

"I don't know, Michael," she replied. "I can't read minds." She blew out a breath and looked intently at her coffee. The scent of buttered pecans reached out and caressed her nose, but she felt no desire to drink.

Michael began to tap his hands in time with his feet. Leah shifted her weight on the bench away from him. Still his feet tapped. She made a noise halfway between a whine and a growl. Tap. Tappity. Tap. Tap. Tappity. Tap.

"Stop it!" Leah hissed finally, "It's pissing me off." Michael obliged. She began to study the dark smudges of gum pressed long ago into the concrete beneath her feet.

An odd silence lingered between them like a shameful smell. No sounds came from around them. Not even nature spoke. Then the wind broke the impasse, whispering in the branches of the oak trees. Michael began to sing softly under his breath. Leah couldn't identify the song.

"Where's your coffee?" she asked.

"What?"

"Your coffee. You only brought back one." Leah searched his eyes for a moment. He looked down and began fidgeting with the buttons on his coat. One dangled on a lone thread.

"Changed my mind."

Leah frowned.

"*Really*," he insisted.

"Whatever."

The wind brought the distant sounds of a child laughing to Leah's ears.

"I don't want you to go, Michael."

Michael stood up abruptly and faced her, nearly screaming, "I knew it! You didn't tell her, did you? *Did you?*"

Leah flinched, clutching her coffee so tightly that the top popped up. Wearing a guilty posture, she nevertheless calmly replaced the lid on the cup.

"Damn it, Leah, answer me!" Michael paced rapidly back and forth in front of her, pausing once to kick the bench. She remained silent, looking down at her sand-colored boots.

"I know what she'd say," she said finally. "She'd say no."

"You don't *know* if you don't ask! You're not mind-reader, remember?"

Unable to contain his emotions, he turned to the sky and screamed, startling a large crow who was hunting up breakfast in a nearby trash bin. It cawed back at him and resumed its search.

The wind sighed through the trees again. A duck called to its mate in the distance. "Michael," started Leah, "I..."

"No, don't, Leah. I trusted you. You said you could convince her. You promised it would be ok."

"Wait, I never promised. I said I'd ask her, yes, but I thought about it on the bus."

"Oh, the bus again!" he screamed, "What is it about the bus that changes your mind so easily?"

A couple passing by began to walk a little faster, glancing furtively at Leah and Michael.

"Shhh, Michael. People are staring." Leah adjusted her red wool scarf. The wind was picking up.

He opened his mouth to protest, then shut it, resuming his agitated pace before her.

"Why?" he begged.

Leah's eyes, still cast downward, widened sharply at his entreaty. She took a deliberate sip of her now-cool coffee. The pecan flavor saved it from tasting like the paper cup. She took a deep breath, letting it out quietly, slowly.

"You need to tell her, Michael. No. Wait," she said quickly when she saw his mouth twitch. "Listen to me, I'm older than you. I know her better. She changed when you were born. You were her little miracle. It's not fair if you just leave without telling her about Chris."

"I can't, Leah. She's old school. I don't want to fight with her."

"But it's like lying for you to leave like this. She won't understand without the Chris explanation."

Michael walked to the edge of the artificial lake behind the bench. A breeze pushed a feather fitfully around the water's edge. He looked at his reflection. It stared back at him complacently.

"I don't want to break her heart, Leah. She wanted something else from me that I can't give her."

"But she'll still wonder. She'll wonder why you don't bring anyone for Thanksgiving."

"Lots of guys don't bring anyone to Thanksgiving." Michael shuffled his feet.

"What if she asks? Are you going to avoid her phone calls and emails? Are you going to cut her off?" Leah's voice was losing its strength. Her heart felt leaden.

Michael sat down beside her. He pressed his chin into his chest, arms folded.

"I'm still moving."

"How'll you pay for the truck? You don't have the money."

Michael fiddled with his coat buttons again for a little while.

"Chris," he finally announced, as though the name solved it all. "Chris' mom is ok. We can borrow her Volvo and get some bungee cords."

"What... you're gonna make twenty trips a hundred miles each way?" she asked sharply. "And it doesn't solve your problem, Michael. You're young. She's not old. There are a lot of years. Will you hide for them all?"

Michael stood again and swung his arms wide, "You don't understand, Leah! We're nothing alike. You *wouldn't* understand. It's just not that easy." He thumped his chest on the last word for emphasis.

"Fine," she said stiffly. "Go. Leave me to explain."

"No, Leah, don't. Not..." he began anxiously.

"No," she assured, "Not that. Don't worry about that. That's for you to explain. Someday. No, you're leaving me to lie for you and about you. It's not fair."

They both stayed silent for a while. More people were starting to appear in the square. Most were scurrying around in their own little thought bubbles, barely

aware of other people's presences. A few others were wandering aimlessly or starting and stopping, looking around confusedly.

The sounds of traffic, the growl of a bus leaving the stop, the rudeness of a horn, shouting voices finally reached Leah's ears.

"I have to go. I'm going to be late."

"Leah," said Michael as she stood, gathering herself. Her name hung alone in the air.

Without looking back, Leah began to walk briskly toward the sounds of the awakening city.

"I'm sorry," he shouted out to her.

"I'm sorry," he apologized in a whisper.

Michael stayed to watch the ducks come out on the lake. Sitting close to the water's edge, he sobbed quietly, privately. The world spun and played its games. The crow flew away.