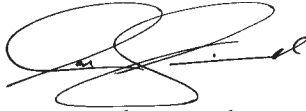




*Three and a half and going nowhere fast.*

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## IN A SMALL BUT NOT TOO SMALL CITY



Ian Schimmel

Ours has always been a small city. It has everything we need and then some, but no more: municipal parks and gardens, museums, a working seaport, a downtown with several official buildings, a modern air terminal. It is an honest, working-class place with reliable dreams, small enough to know many people and run into them again, big enough to never see the same person twice if you do not want. We are situated in a valley below foothills before an ocean. Once upon a time all our ancestors made a living from the sea.

This story I am about to describe happened during the rainy season. It was late on a weekday, I remember. I had stayed long at work and when I opened my apartment the phone was ringing. It was my mother and father, both on the line talking on top of the other. My brother had gotten engaged. I had to call and congratulate him. Where had I been? Was I out on a date? Was I meeting anyone new? Why not? Was I depressed? Of course I was depressed, they decided. And if I wasn't, how could I not be? When would I settle down and give them grandchildren? He can't find anyone because he won't apply himself, said my father. And he picks his ear, said my mother. They would often do this, have complete conversations with one another as

though I were not there. They were complaining about the weather now, and whether this should be considered drizzle or mist. Seventeen unique forms of precipitation occur in our valley, and so I held my parents there on my shoulder and read the mail while they argued which one this was.

The mail was the usual. A few bills and bank offers, what looked like a summons for civic duty, but mostly catalogues and circulars—nothing like the shock that had arrived the day before.

It will turn another time for you, said my mother. They'd settled the matter with the weather. It will. It has to, said my father. No, it *must*. After all, how much worse could it get? They shared this laugh and called me by my pet name and then they told me they loved me and hung up.

But I remained there, looking at her telephone number where I'd placed it by the telephone as a reminder. It was beside her magazine—*her* magazine, I called it now—that shock I'd received in the previous day's mail, the magazine, on the cover of which she strutted toward me wearing a *slit silk charmeuse with filigree lace bodice*, pg. 43, this girl, this model, whose number it was.

I'd met her the week previous at the grocer's.

This was after I had gone through a long breakup with a girl that I was convinced I loved. She loved me too, I believed, but then she had wanted to see other people. There are plenty of people here! I said. Why did she need to go away to meet other people? And if she wanted to meet other people, well, I could stand right beside her while she did! But somehow she had chosen her mind. People here were all the same, she said, and they all ended up the same. What was she supposed to do, she protested, marry *me* and end up working in the city bank? Those women start with two eyebrows and forty years later—she pointed at her forehead and then she held the finger at me. They have only *one*!

She was going away to university, to a truly big city, but that was ruined when her father passed suddenly and her mother and younger sisters required her work. So there she was, many months later, still

with the same job, miserable and sad, but stubborn as ever behind her register, and for some reason that she alone knew we were not together.

And that's where I met the other girl, this girl on the magazine cover. I was doing my shopping, buying wild dates, in fact. She and I reached for the same and sent the whole collection down. Flute music played in the ceiling. We apologized and gathered them, and I explained a similar experience I'd had during a school trip to a medical museum with an exhibit of antique prostheses. She laughed.

The manager was gaping now, tapping his shoe at the end of the aisle. I asked her if she was from around here—which of course by her fashion I knew that she was—and where she lived, and she told me, and I happened to have a cousin who lived in that part of town, and she looked at me suspiciously, dates in hand, and said her family name—the small joke in our small city being that everyone has a cousin who lives or works everywhere else, and that more often than not we are all related. Then and now you would hear about a friend who had on accident dated too close a relation, and then the joke was not a joke at all, but I liked this bit of local irreverence—and from so stunning a person! I don't know what happened because this was not like me, especially not with beautiful women—I asked for her number.

She seemed surprised as well. She said, My number?

Everyone was watching us now. Nothing captures the attention like new romance, or auto accidents. He's not worth it, said the old woman who was filling out her bank slip at the register. Ah, but who is to say, offered the manager, arms crossed, voice softening. The clam and the gull. This referring to that children's story about unlikely love. Meanwhile my ex, in her staring, had forgotten an onion on the scale and the old woman snapped, Are you going to charge me for your fat hand, too?! The older woman snatched the onion off, shaking it and generally making a scene, as older women in our town will do once their beauty has fled, and so the girl and I were in private once again.

Here, she said, handing me a torn slip, and it felt like the foreign films—the guy getting the girl, not as in our films, the guy drinking so he forgets the girl—and I was brought so far elsewhere by this that when I remembered to look up and thank her she was gone.

I was still in too jumbled a mood, and so I put my items back and had almost made it to the opposite street when I heard my name. My ex was in the doorway, apron in her fist. People had always told me that she looked like her father and I had never seen it—thankfully!—but now I did. She stood capably but inelegantly, like the women who worked at the bank, the woman she feared becoming. And yet it was this person that I had ached over. And *over*. I looked at her now and tried to make that feeling again, but all I grew was pity. She repeated my name, her face crowded with fury, and, I thought, not a little fear. But instead I bowed and walked home, smiling—I don't know why—leaving her to call after me, through our streets, through our valley, through our hills, *Fool!*

A week had passed since I spoke with my parents, and every day she stood there on her cover, the girl who I had met. A model! Who had given me her number! So why hadn't I called? Because reality had inevitably set in, which was the same set of ideas without exclamation. She was a model. On the cover. I was not that clam and she was not that seagull. I was a student at the local university, trying to convince himself that he enjoyed foreign films and beer, who was not, as girls had gently implied or stated outright, all that attractive. I was the funny one, the one who could make them laugh.

And then one morning I woke up. It was misting or fogging and I felt likewise in mind. I had stayed out with friends the night before and come home again, alone. Perhaps I did what I did then because I was still in a dream. Or maybe it was remembering how my friends had replied when I told them I was thinking of moving to a truly big city, and they had all turned laughing. Or perhaps I was still drunk. Whatever the instance, I stood. I splashed water upon my face. I seized her number from the sinktop and the phone. It was ringing. Hello? said a female voice. I was awake.

So you're calling me? she said. This after I apologized and remembered to explain who I was. Why are you calling me two weeks too late? She sounded like she had sat down, but in none too good a mood.

I was honest. There are two reasons, I said. One, I was thinking of

calling you. I wanted to call you, I steered, but I didn't have anything to say to you.

Oh no, she said, like a doctor who had seen this condition too many times. But then, without any medical consideration whatsoever, Who cares what you say! What is there to lose? Ask me how much money I make—what is my rudest habit! I knew from the tone that her hand swooped overhead. Do you have a realistic chance to sleep with me. These! The essential things. *Truths!*

I hadn't expected this. The girl in the store with the dates had been calm, kind. Now it was as if I was speaking to a different person and I wondered if I understood people at all.

I went out on my small balcony to think. Balcony was a bit of an overstatement. As my ex complained, it allowed barely enough space for her to be outside so she didn't have to listen to me. And, as she liked to announce so that every neighbor would hear, it wasn't high enough to jump off either.

Well, I tried, do I have any chance of sleeping—

Are you drunk? No! You can't steal mine! Your own! See? This is awful now. But she didn't hang up. I could see her then, pacing her cloud-lit studio, hand in her hair. She stopped and sighed. I'm sorry, she said. It's that I'm in the middle of a project that's running me wild.

What's the problem?

I need to find a way to fit eight park benches where there's only room for four. Or, she said, entirely to herself, I could scrap the family style tables...

The pause was as mute as an ear. She is right, I thought. What is there to lose?

What I always wonder about, I began, is why benches are built for two or three. No one really wants to sit with anyone else. I went on: Why not chairs instead of benches? I think it's because we want to think that we want to sit with someone, when really we don't. Or we want to hope that someone will join us, maybe the love of our life, but at the end of the end it's easier and less painful to eat our sandwiches in peace.

These were the kinds of ideas I had, a heartbroken university student.

There was a long silence on her end, but it was not one of those empty, distancing ones. It was intimate. Growing in closeness. Filling with itself.

And the second reason? she said. I thought I heard a tin lid open. Sardines on toast was also my breakfast. I wondered if she licked the lid.

I got your magazine.

Ah, she said quietly, and it was all she said because truths can end as many conversations as they begin.

Well—I searched around. Some weather we're having, I said, and it was, and it was doing wonders for my sobriety. What do you think? I asked her. Is this mist? Or drizzle?

She moaned. Please, not the weather, you sound like my grandparents!

I looked toward the foothills, shrouded in climate. Somewhere over there is a beautiful woman, and here is foolish, foolish man.

I said, Humor me. Go outside. If you're not intrigued then you can hang up. No hard feelings.

No hard feelings?

None. I'm a rock.

Then all of your feelings are hard, she said.

I bit my thumb.

But all right, she said. I'll see.

I didn't hang up, is what she said when she came back. It's drizzling.

No! I said. Not in a dream.

Yes! she said. Where did you leave your skin, the *bar*?

And that is how we finally began to talk—really talk—like generations of people from the beginning of time, but especially from our soggy part of the world—complaining about the weather.

Not mist or drizzle, no potage or torrent could keep me from making the trek up to her apartment during those watery months. She lived not in an air-lit studio but in a dingy back flat above a restaurant. I hope you like smells, she said the first time she let me in. She wore jeans and a frock shirt but no makeup or scent. Her place was poorly lit and not a creative mess as I'd imagined it, but a mess. I cleaned, she said. You can sit, and then she stood, hand on her head, deciding where.

We ordered cartons and she ate more than I. People always think I'm dieting, she said. But not a day in my life. When I was in primary school, she swallowed, they brought the nurse because they thought my parents were neglects. In secondary they thought I was starving myself. During the entrance exam she had been so nervous that she diminished two sizes and her pants fell when she stood. She told me this not that night but later.

I also learned that she was not a model any more. Now she worked at an architecture firm through a connection of her father's. She had tried modeling when she was younger but relinquished it for more practical things. The picture that had arrived in the mail had been taken two years ago, in the arcade. But then just last month she'd received a call. The magazine's preferred girl had been struck by a moped. Could they use her photos? Of course, of course, was the girl all right? and so on. She doubted anything would come of it. After all, our city was known for creating many beautiful women. Not steel, or oil, or minerals. Models, caviar, and sturgeon! cried the old mongers at the corner bars. Our only exports! The first two we can't afford, and the third you couldn't pay us to eat!

Besides, her job at the firm was a good one. They had received the new park commission from the city. After we ate she showed me some of her own sketches. They were direct without being simplistic and she had a good sense of line. These are very fine, I said, but already she was stowing them and unrolling something else. It was the proposal for the new park. Single benches! I cried.

Everyone loved the idea, but—she warned, I didn't give you any glory.

That's okay. I touched my heart. *I'll* know.

We sat on her futon and talked, about our families, our interests, and our futures, what little of them we could see. I made her laugh a few times, which encouraged me, and when it was quiet I made an attempt. She didn't turn away. But she did not return much either, and we sat quietly afterward. Spray pebbled the window. When I said good night she thought about it. Yes, she said finally, and then she closed her door so that it made no sound. Her light continued to burn through the wet, now blustery dark, and after a time it went out. I walked home,



down her street, whistling, and felt, as we say in these parts, that my heart was as light as a fish.

I don't think we were ever romantically involved. We kissed that first night and some since. It did not seem strange when we did or when we didn't. I could always tell when she was interested and I didn't press anything if she was not. I never asked her about other people. We were friends, and something. In a way that was the most pleasant part, not having a name for what we were doing.

We would go for dinner, or ride bicycles, or walk down to the quay and watch the fishermen shout to one another, dumping nets and ropes and baskets of fish onto the docks, while out in the bay the little green and red and yellow boats begged at the cliffs, waiting for a wave to lift them through the passage where it was deep enough to sail—all this as taught to them by their fathers and their fathers' fathers and so on.

If the weather was not too cruel we sat on my balcony with music. Once, my neighbor, an elderly woman, came out and I turned the dial because we were listening to controversial lyrics. Oh, don't bother, she said, don't mind me, waving away the air as for whiteflies. We've sung all those songs, and then she tottered back inside. I felt a jab in my ribs and when finally the woman's door closed we laughed.

Sometimes we would go downtown for an inexpensive dinner. I saw how people, especially men, looked at her, which was with a chewing sort of study, as if they worked her beauty long enough they might figure out how it functioned and then not have to look at it anymore. And how women looked at her, to find a seam, and when they couldn't, how they turned instead and looked at me. Seams galore! Sometimes, acting the fool, I waved. It was amusing how everyone complimented her clothing, even when she was wearing nothing special at all. People opened doors when I forgot, which was often, and generally went out of their way to be pleasant. Once, on a stroll, a homeless man struck up a conversation. She kindly explained that we had no money, to which he laughed and handed her a small bill and bid us good evening. She looked like she was destined for greater things, and simply by that we would all make sure that she was.

And then one windy, torrential night my buzzer rang. She was soaked and clutching a soaking letter. Inside! I had to shout it. What? What's wrong?

She'd been invited to a shoot! It was only a trial but it was in a big city at an exclusive hotel. She could even bring a guest. What should she do?

You should invite me, I said.

Stop, she said. Should I go?

Yes! This is your dream! I said.

Is it? she asked. A drop fell from her eyebrow.

Of course! I said, and I went on, repeating, I realized, many of the things my ex had said, encouraging a girl I very much liked to leave, whereas before with another I had spoken against it. I wondered but couldn't decide what had changed.

She did end up inviting me to the tryout and to her exclusive hotel, but not into her exclusive bed. I slept on an exclusive sofa. I was, however, allowed backstage. I don't like this, she said when she came out of the dressing room. I don't like the way it hangs. It's wrong, and she dropped it. But the creator herself had put it on her. Yes, she snapped, but it's wrong. We looked in the mirror.

I know! I said, and from a nearby vase I tore a flower that happened also to be the municipal symbol of our town. I held it out. Yes? They were calling for her.

Okay, she said. But no, here. Like this.

Afterward she was called to the judge's table. You were very good, said the head judge without, it seemed to me, great interest. This was a round woman in all black with stylish eyeglasses and the smoother western accent. The ensemble was not good, she went on. But there is something—and she looked up from her paperwork, but she was not smiling—international about you.

Well, she said, and looked at me, I'm not. I'm from, and she told her.

I watched the woman, but she did not seem to understand the name of our small but not too small city. She squinted. She pointed

the black pen. It flashed. That flower, she said. It was whimsical yet keen. Did you do that?

She said that yes, she had, which was true, she had done it, in the frustration, shoving the stem jauntily through a buttonhole of the top-coat before stomping—inelegantly, I thought—onto the stage.

I'm going to sign you, said the woman suddenly. Everyone here wants to sign you and you'll learn that soon enough, but I represent the biggest houses in the biggest cities and can pay you the most, and then she looked down and it became evident that her eyes would not rise again. And so she signed.

On one of her last afternoons here we got ices and went down to the site of the new park. Strikes are a constant impediment to progress in our city and there were only two people working among those sprinkling, moon-sized puddles. A foreman directed a driver lurching atop a front-end loader. She wouldn't be around to see the project through. But the designs had all been finalized and her family had approved of her new opportunity. Even her father was optimistic. If you don't, he'd told her, you will always wonder, and to wonder is a merciless thing.

What about you? she said suddenly.

What about me, I said, a joke, and only later, much later, would I ask it seriously of myself.

We looked down. An argument had started below. The foreman was pointing at a pile of gray earth and the driver threw a red glove at it and walked away to smoke his papyros at the drizzled sea. It was silent except for the soft sound of the rain. It would take thirty years to build the park at this rate.

Afterward we walked the beach. I'm glad I met you, she said, as if she might have had other feelings until now.

Only glad? I said. First the benches, then the flower. Where would you be without me? She laughed and I took her hand. I knew this was my stop on the elevator. I had known it was coming all along, and so I met it humorously, with no small amount of dignity I remember congratulating myself at the time. Besides, we hadn't even had sex, and

probably weren't going to. We seemed to have been in one of those mysterious spaces where friends go, silently, hand in hand, doing and saying nothing of the nothing they tell themselves they are doing. We walked on in this way until she found a conch where it lay on the sand like a kicked ear. She held it to hers. What? I said.

Sh, she whispered. It's ringing.

We always said we would keep in touch and I knew we believed it, but I also knew that we would not. So I was not surprised when I never heard from her, and when the next time I saw her it was three years later, on the cover of her first international lingerie catalogue: *Hot Savings Come Home for the Holidays*. There she was, opening a heavy plankwood door with a brass knocker, snow tumbling down, clothed in nothing but a red silk camisole, looking scandalized to have found me, a stranger, staring back.

The park did not take thirty years to build. With great focus and greater will it was completed ahead of schedule, in only twenty-nine. By then my parents were gone from this world, and many other people had passed through the hotel of my life, some who knocked quietly, poking their heads around the door, leaving just as quickly as they had come, and others who unpacked and stayed for years. I looked at my hands. They had become old.

I have been to that park countless times. I stroll there most afternoons, even in weather. In fact, it was once many years later that I rested there with the woman who had graciously agreed to marry me. It was one of our rare, beautiful days. What about here, I said stopping at a bench.

And where do I sit?

I patted my lap, grinning like a stray.

These are absurd! Single benches, she said disgustedly, but sat. This was when the treatments were less effective, but before she was failing and when I was in not so fine health myself. I began to tell her the story.

Who will keep you from repeating yourself when I'm not around, old man?

You? I said. If I know you, you're not going anywhere, I said, which would not become true.

She sat back, which caused some bladder ache, but not terribly, so it was manageable. I think what I will miss most, she said sleepily, is the sun. Her eyes opened then, at something high above she had remembered. Tell me, and no untruth. Do I still have two eyebrows?

Her departing was sad, but not unexpected. I even went to lunch with some other women. Life is not hard, I tell my children and grandchildren. I raise a finger. Life, my sweeties, is *long*!

As for the other girl, the model, I saw her only once after she left our small city. All things considered, she is by far the most famous person to come out of this town. We all followed her tumultuous union to that celebrated midfielder, then her nuptials with that owner of an iridium mine who later perished in his own caves. Sadness preys on us all, but it only eats a few. She never had a family. Later, with money left to her, she began her own design line. Clothing, perfumes. Right up until the end, people agreed that her beauty was still there, the flame dimmed, but there. Sardines, it was agreed. For the skin! cheered the old mongers, gulping them and then their drinks. For the heart!

But the last time I saw her was many years later, when even she had withered. She was the honorary at a ribbon ceremony for New City Hall. A large crowd had gathered and our city does not feel small when it determines to form a crowd. She gave a short speech about what the city had meant to her and how much she owed it and how she missed the people here and how close she still felt to the city even though she had been away for very long. And then she left. I didn't try to get in touch. How could I, by pushing through the crowd like many others who wanted pictures and autographs? Even if I had made it near to her bodyguards, what would I have shouted? So.

We slept together for the first time the night before she left. I had sensed it might happen—or at least I was going to see if she was at all interested. We had been kissing and this had been progressing but when I brought out the wine she said, Not that. She got up and went wordlessly to the bedroom. I waited, and then I waited the wait of the dead because the washcloset was also there. But when she did not

come out I went in and knocked. Her voice answered behind me. From bed. I lit a candle that, when she laughed, blew out, and so it was like the intimacies I'd had with other lovely but far less beautiful women, wonderful and foreign, but only our bodies seeing.

Perhaps that is what makes it so difficult to remember and so difficult for people to believe. Men want facts of sex and when I explain that it is hard to remember they laugh. Stiff, they stand to smoke and reach under the eave to feel at the rain. Ah! There he goes again, they say. A fish swimming in his own water!

Even my own children hold their doubts. At our last holiday meal my eldest son, a civic litigator, demanded that it was not onion but breadfruits that his late mother neglected on the grocer's scale. No, it was dates! said my daughter. The *onions* tumbled. Dates, onions. Grocer's, laundrist's, says my youngest, I've heard them all! Ah, memory is his thief, groans my niece. He's gone old! Yes, yes! I say, nearly rising, And may you all be struck by the lightning of seeing me when I am gone! And on and on like this, until my nephew, a priest who is sullen because he is in love, says, Enough! Let him finish so we can be done with it. To which my granddaughter, now in her second year herself, who thinks—her mother has confided in me—that I'm a chauvinist and a bombast, turns them all to laughing with some little barb I do not quite catch, and so I sit there, truly the fool—an old man and his spoon, smiling, not knowing at what.

