

Excerpt from *This Familiar Heart: An Improbable Love Story*:

Babette is only about two minutes late getting to Harrigan's. She's not sure what to expect. Will she know the man when she sees him?

The foyer is gloomy after the bright sunlight of the parking lot, but she isn't standing there long, blinking, when a tall figure in a faded blue jean jacket appears in the doorway to the even darker interior.

He is taller than she expected, and there is something about his face that doesn't come into focus. He is speaking to her, though, so it must be him, but he seems to be looking around her at the same time.

They sit in a booth and order beer. Only one other table has occupants.

She initiates her rehearsed explanation, slipping her shyness into an envelope of words. A quick summary of her writing project, her work for magazines, her hope for fiction. How she has recently applied to the graduate creative writing program at UH.

The manager brings them their drinks.

Hale asks where she grew up. "Actually, the other end of the street I live on now," she replies, smiling at the peculiarity. "The name changes, though." She's doing the usual dance around the fact of River Oaks. The affluence of the neighborhood carries implications of privilege that embarrass her.

He looks quizzical.

"It changes at Kirby Drive," she adds. "Not too far from here."

He doesn't press for more.

She can see Hale's mood is divided, half at ease, half edgy—and all the while glancing at her, the lightest brushing glance from pale blue eyes, sliding past. Kind eyes, she thinks. Maybe. She wishes they'd hold hers longer, although even the graze gives her a jolt.

As they talk, she discovers he comes from the part of West Texas where her father was born. Maybe that's why the rhythm of his speech feels familiar. His accent is stronger, though.

She asks a few questions. Or, more accurately, she makes statements phrased as questions in the attempt to locate commonalities of outlook. This habit is so intrinsic to her, she hardly knows it's happening. When he becomes a little prickly, she's so surprised she moves quickly to something else. Afterward, she will retain the impression of his response, but not the offending subject.

He asks about her novel and she tells him as much as she can.

"Whose work do you like to read?" he asks.

"Walker Percy, at the moment. Have you read him?"

He has not. "Should I?"

“He’s a wonderful writer,” she says. “Sometimes his writing makes me anxious. Once in a while. Not his newest, *The Second Coming*. I really loved that.”

Hale is listening. The sliding gaze—on her, then away.

She decides it’s shyness that keeps him from meeting her eyes for long. But around him the air seems to glitter. There is something delicate but important about his attention. She keeps wanting to hold her breath, the way you do when an exceptional bird lights near you. Or a wild animal that would never cause you harm. She wills herself to relax onto her chair. It doesn’t quite work.