

# Better late

A wealth of possibilities.

Andrew worked on the information desk at the Library of Time, a thankless job with too much to do and only barely enough time to do it. He wasn't particularly happy in his job, nor was he well suited to the work. In fact, when seen from afar, the words 'customer' and 'service' came to mind only after a long list of words like 'surly' and 'unapproachable'. But he had one talent for the work that few possessed and that was always in high demand among the library's upper management: Andrew hated time travel. Hated, indeed, the very notion of it.

He was the type who, at the cinema, would roll his eyes and complain whenever the plot of a movie hinged on poorly explained time jumps. If a nearby theorist commented on how time was more a compressed instant than an infinite spectrum, Andrew finished his coffee and stormed right out of the cafe.

He couldn't stand most science fiction, scoffed outright at hacks like H. G. Wells, and had once thrown a volume set of the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* across the room in a fit of pique.

So when someone walked up to the information desk at the library and requested a copy of the Antikythera blueprints from the archives in Pergamon, Andrew sullenly punched in some keys on his computer, handed over the parchment in question, updated the card catalogue, and very firmly resolved — once again — not to question how it all worked.

And this system worked fairly well for everyone involved, until the day Andrew saw Susan again.

She came in on a Tuesday morning, and right away Andrew knew that he was in trouble.

She looked almost exactly as he

remembered. She had laughter lines now, and her hair was shorter. But apart from that, she might as well have walked

out of a daydream. Meanwhile he'd gained 30 pounds and lost almost as much hair. He slouched in his seat and prayed she wouldn't recognize him.

"Andrew!" she shouted from across the lobby.

He lifted a hand and managed a weak "Hello" from his place behind the desk. In the back of his head he tried to recall, to the minute, the last time they'd spoken.

"I'm busy with work or I'd stay to chat," she said, breathless. "I didn't know you worked here."

Dr Myers' class, it had been. Right after their last lecture together. She'd worn a blue sweater and he'd almost confessed right there, but hadn't had the nerve to do it. They'd promised to keep in touch instead — only he'd never found the courage to pick up the phone.

"Sure do," he said. "How can

I help?"

"I'm looking for a copy of the book of Isaiah," she said. "Original, if you have it, but I'll take anything on papyrus."

He punched in the request and tried to calm his racing heart. They made small talk, which quickly stuttered, flat-lined and was pronounced dead on the scene. He sunk farther and farther into his chair until minutes later, when a library attendant came by and dropped off a thick roll of parchment. Susan smiled.

"You know," she said, gathering her papers and turning to leave, "I had the biggest crush on you in school."

And just like that, Andrew found a missing piece of his own life's story.

Here's what did not happen next.

Andrew did not turn to the card catalogue, bring up the search menu and key in Susan's name with his school years as restrictions to the search form. Nor did he pull up his own written records for that era and pore over the two accounts, side by side, like one might reread a favourite tragic novel — always half rooting for the characters you know have no chance.

He didn't look through the years after, either — tracing her through research papers and lecture notes that marked her distracted path through the realm of academia, always privately hoping that some new passion would replace the gulf in her heart that reminded her that somewhere, somehow, she'd forgotten something very important.

But he didn't do all that, because as soon as Susan left, a man in a nondescript grey suit walked in and handed him two envelopes.

The first contained a pink slip informing him of his dismissal, with a ticked box next to the phrase "Improper Use of Job Privileges".

"Ridiculous," Andrew muttered. "I've never done anything of the sort."

To which the second envelope responded: "Precisely."

Andrew scowled and mumbled and fumed until a third envelope appeared on his desk, which he ignored in lieu of slamming his meagre belongings into a cardboard box and storming out the door. He met his replacement in the parking lot, a moustached gentleman who'd been hired two weeks later and yet, somehow, precisely on time.

On the drive home, Andrew puzzled over what he'd done wrong. He hadn't been fired for something he'd done, he was sure of that. He could've been fired only for something he *might* have done, or rather, had *almost* done — but here his natural aversion to the subject took hold, and he could go no further. He knew only that he'd somehow been tempted into taking a chance. But by the nature of the situation, he didn't know what the chance had been.

And so he turned these thoughts over and over in his head until he reached his driveway, where he killed the ignition, sighed and realized he'd probably never know for sure.

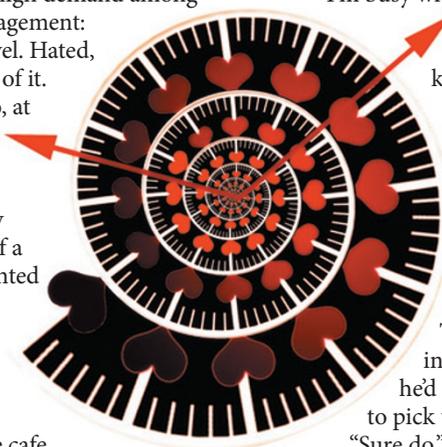
But he had a guess.

He looked Susan up in the phone book and left a rambling message on her machine — one that he'd probably have taken back, had he had the means. But as he didn't, Susan called him back, and they had lunch together later that week.

Or, as some theorists would have it, at the exact same instant they met. □

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