

THE WAY WE ARE

The foam on the coffee's losing all its bubbles, just like the first cup did 30? 35 years ago? It seemed quite exotic drinking proper cappuccino in central London in those days. How things have changed. The café is now a Coffee Shop and quite upmarket, not like it was back then, when Luigi ruled the roost like a Roman emperor. Do you remember Luigi? Of course you do. You've never stopped coming here. I decided to forego the pastries. I don't really like them anymore – an unexpected, but welcome, consequence of the passage of time. Who'd have thought I'd end up growing and preparing all my own food? Life was too busy for it even to cross my mind in those halcyon days of yore, filled with ambition and hectic socialising.

It's hard to believe that spilling coffee over your trousers could lead where it did. I'd never known a musician, not in real life, only on board planes, and you don't get to know your passengers even if they travel regularly on long haul flights. I'd probably not have noticed you without that fateful spill, and I expect for you, I was just another air hostess. They're called flight attendants these days, aren't they. I wonder why? Have you ever noticed how it's tiny things that determine the course of our lives, not the big events that we all plan and work for but the silly little details we don't even notice until they've worked their magic. Sometimes not even then.

Along the road is the concert hall where I first heard you play. It hasn't changed that much, not from the outside, at least. A bit dingier, maybe, and more jaded, but that's probably my perception rather than the reality. I was so out of my depth and couldn't believe I was backstage with all those imposing people dressed in grand clothes, every single one a Master of the Art in a field I'd only ever known as an observer. Still was, obviously, but from a different vantage point than previously. They turned out to be completely ordinary, of course. It became so commonplace that I took it all for granted. I loved being part of your world. Not just the music, but the canal boat trips, the long dinner parties, the lazy afternoons just wandering along the river or round the park with no particular aim in mind. Do you remember the tree sparrows in the copse near the supermarket? It's an age since I've seen one but they were around all the time then. And the starlings squabbling in the trees outside our bedroom window? I wonder if you're still interested in the natural world, or if life has taken you away from all that. We drifted apart without even noticing it happening. Water under the bridge.

And then, from nowhere, I had a beautiful daughter, and then a daughter learning the harp, and then a daughter at music college. Me! The mother of a musician! How I longed to share it with you, so you could be as thrilled as I was myself. None of my friends has ever been into music and

they didn't really seem to get it. Why would they? They all have children of their own to be proud of. Do you remember how hopeless I was when you tried to teach me the flute? We can safely conclude she didn't get it from me! She's playing at that same concert hall tonight. No surprise, then, that the memories are flooding back.

She never asked about you, you know. It's only recently she's admitted it was because she'd noticed how much more difficult things were for me than for her friends with two parents, and she didn't want to seem ungrateful. What a terrible burden for a child to carry. Your daughter's a remarkable woman and a superb musician, just like you.

It's a strange thought that if she hadn't been studying where you teach, she might never have known who her father was; but the facial resemblance is pretty striking and she sounds like you, too. When she asked me straight if she was related, I could hardly say no, could I. She said it felt like you were expecting it but you're not blind and of course, she has my surname. You must have wondered. She filled me in on the basics of your life, although I wasn't sure I really wanted to know. You have only the one child – her half-sister, of course – lost your wife five years after she was born; and had to pare down your career to raise your daughter. Now she's a doctor, specialising in skin diseases – not a chip off the old block then - and you're performing again at full pelt. I'm so glad you've been able to get back where you belong. It was so deeply embedded in you and none of us fundamentally changes, do we.

She tells me that they get on really well together, looking and feeling like the sisters they are. I can't bear even to imagine what I deprived you all of by keeping you apart. Do you hate me for it? I genuinely believed it was the right thing and to be fair, it still feels that there was no other option, given what I knew at the time.

In the fullness of time, we're going to have the same son-in-law, probably the same grandchildren. How life twists and turns and takes us by surprise. Who could have thought we'd end up distant relations, due to a chance meeting that led to one passionate night we both wished had never happened as soon as the sun started to rise? I realise now that you must have been very recently widowed, so you probably had to pay a disproportionate price for what was ultimately a trivial encounter.

So, here I am with a cold cup of coffee that hasn't been touched, waiting for you to turn up to discuss the arrangements for our daughter's wedding. Will I recognise you? Of course I will. Okay, this is it. Time to face the music.