

Coffee with a Twist

It was a bitter, east wind morning, and James was glad of the muggy warmth of the Caffè Nero. This was his one concession to the 21st century; every Monday morning after Sainsbury's, a vanilla caffè latte and a chocolate twist pastry. He sat in a quiet corner, his shopping bags on guard at his feet, his head in his newspaper. James's mind was still sharp, but his body was beginning to feel its age, and he didn't want to cause people any trouble. Little did he know how much trouble someone would cause *him* in the next hour!

A sudden draft of ice-cold air made him glance up. A young woman had come in, and was standing by the door looking round nervously. James didn't recognise her, so was confused when she caught sight of him, and smiled. He looked down quickly, away from her gaze. But a few minutes later she was standing near him, a cup of coffee in one hand, and her shopping in the other. "Excuse me," she said brusquely, "I need to sit here." James rattled his newspaper, hoping she would go away, but she didn't. He sighed and, without looking up, gestured to the empty chair opposite him. The woman stepped over his bags, and sat down. "Thank you," she said, "and forgive me if that sounded rude, I meant to say 'do you mind if I sit here', but it came out wrong." James ignored her, but she persisted. "My name's Wendy."

"James." Still not looking up.

"What a foul day. I saw you earlier in Sainsbury's. You looked terribly sad. Are you all right?"

Reluctantly, James folded away his newspaper. It would seem conversation could not be avoided; he couldn't go on simply ignoring her. For the first time he looked at this woman called Wendy. Mid-twenties, he guessed. Tall and slim. She wore an elegant, long black coat, still buttoned against the weather. Her curly blond hair played provocatively round her shoulders, framing high cheek bones, large blue eyes and a full, gentle mouth. She looked pale and world weary. She was, James thought, an astonishingly beautiful woman. "What did you say?"

"I asked if you were all right. You seemed sad."

James shrugged. "What's to be happy about?"

"It's Christmas soon."

"Oh, I'm too old for all that. Christmas is for young families."

"You don't have one... a family?"

"Yes, two boys; twins actually. They're middle aged now, of course, with children... well, married grownups... of their own. I hardly speak to them, they're always dashing around so much. I think each is hoping the other will invite me over for Christmas."

"I'm sure that's not the case," protested Wendy. "What are their names?"

"John and Paul. My wife chose them; Lesley."

"Ah; after the Beatles, no doubt. I love their music, and everything that went with it in those days. They were exciting times, I'm very jealous of you both." She giggled. "It must have been 'fab'."

James nodded. "Indeed. We were war children. Our generation, and the baby boomers that came after us, were going to... we did... change the world. But nowadays people see us as dodderly old fools. We don't fit into your - what do you call it? - 'digital' world."

Wendy shook her head. "Not everyone thinks that; and not everyone wants to part of that new world. People like you and Lesley can teach us younger ones a lot. By the way, where is Lesley today?"

"... She died a couple of years ago."

Wendy paused, and then said hesitantly, "Were you happy together?"

James shuffled uneasily. "That's a bit personal, isn't it?"

Wendy put her fingers to her mouth in confusion. "I didn't mean to offend you. It sounds so trite simply saying 'I'm sorry'."

"I suppose so. To answer your question; yes, we were very happy. We were married for over forty years, and we loved each other very much. I miss her a lot."

Wendy's eyes flashed with interest. "Forty years; I see, that's good... no, what I mean is... you were lucky to have such a long time together. How did you meet?"

But James raised his hand in interruption. "Please, I think that's enough about me. Tell me about you."

Wendy seemed reluctant to do so. She took off her coat, and hung it over the back of her chair. Then she sighed, and said, "Like what?"

"Are you local?"

"No; just passing through."

"I thought I hadn't seen you before."

"I may be somewhere else tomorrow. It depends."

"On what?" Wendy shrugged, and stayed silent. James tried another question. "Are you married?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean?"

"OK, not for five years." Wendy hesitated, as if not wanting to tell him any more, but then she took a deep breath, and said haltingly, "His name was David. I thought he loved me, but we'd only been married a few months before I realised ... I wasn't enough for him. We were trying to sort things out, but there was a car crash... some underage punk showing off his driving skills to his mates. He... David... died." She paused, and stared sadly at her coffee cup. Then she said wistfully, "It's all I've ever wanted, to be loved; but people don't have time for commitment any more."

James was shocked she should reveal such intimacies to someone she'd only just met. "That *is* worthy of an 'I'm sorry'."

"Thank you," said Wendy quietly. She took a sip of coffee, and looked away.

James could see she wanted to change the subject. "Why did you sit here, with me?"

Wendy's eyes flashed again, as she turned back to him. "It was the only empty chair."

"No it wasn't."

"As I said, I saw you in Sainsbury's. You looked sad."

"Is that how you choose people to talk to? How sad they look?"

"I try to cheer people up; make them happy. Less sad, anyway. It's how I cope."

"Does it work?"

"Sometimes. Has it helped you?"

"Well, you've certainly brightened up my day," said James. He looked around the Caffè; several men, young and old, were staring at Wendy. "Other people's too, I think." They laughed, and for the first time since meeting her James relaxed. How rare, he thought, for two people born in such very different ages to be able to understand each other, and talk like this. He a tired old man with only his memories to live for; she a beautiful young woman with life and opportunity ahead of her. He wondered if, across the years, they saw in each other a common reflection of their own inner loneliness. Whatever, he found himself telling her of the full life he'd shared with Lesley, of the joy their children and grandchildren had brought them, and of the richness of their growing old together. He was flattered by how

much interest she showed; laughing as he reminisced about 'beatlemania', and prompting him with questions. It was a long time before he fell silent.

James drank down the long-cold remains of his coffee, and checked his watch. "Look at the time, I'd better be going. I'm due at the Doctor's in half an hour. It's been lovely talking to you, I hope things work out."

Wendy didn't seem to hear him. She sat lost in thought, her face serious, as James gathered his shopping bags. Then she took a deep breath, as if a decision made, and looked up at him. "Would you like a second chance... with Lesley?" There was a tension in her voice that James hadn't heard before.

"Of course."

"What would you give to get it?"

"I don't understand."

Wendy leant forward, anxious. "Would you sell your soul for her?"

James sat down again. "What on earth do you mean?"

"Answer me!" demanded Wendy. "Did you love Lesley that much?"

"I... I don't believe I have a soul."

"You're not religious?"

"No. What you see is what you get. There's nothing else."

Wendy shivered. "You're *so* wrong. But I must know; if you were religious would you sell your soul for another chance with Lesley?"

"Wendy, I'm not."

Wendy stared hard at James; silent.

James felt trapped by her intensity, needing to say something, anything, to appease her. "Ok... um... let me put it this way. I loved Lesley dearly, and I do so wish I could have a second chance with her. Does that help?"

Stayed staring.

James laughed nervously. "What's the matter?"

Stayed silent.

"Wendy, you're frightening me."

She sat back slowly, and relaxed her gaze. "It's all right, I was testing you."

"What?"

"Testing your love for Lesley."

“Testing my...” said James, angrily. “How dare you. It’s none of your business.”

Wendy smiled. “I needed to be sure. I’d give anything to be loved like Lesley was.” She reached over, and touched James’s hand.

James drank down the long-cold remains of his coffee, and checked his watch. “Look at the time, we’d better be going. The new Beatles LP is out in half an hour. What’s it called?”

“The White Album,” said Wendy. “I’ll come with you. Where are our own baby Beatles?”

“Over there, playing with the lego. And look at them, they’re not babies any more. I can’t believe they’re two next week. Christmas is going to be such a blast this year!” He waved to them. “John, Paul. Come on, time to go.”

“I’ll get them,” said Wendy, “you bring the shopping bags.” She stood up, and put on the elegant, long black coat he’d bought her that morning.

James watched her walk over to the toy area, and help the twins into the double buggy. He smiled as three teenage boys gawped open-mouthed as she leaned over, her curly blond hair playing provocatively round her shoulders. It struck him how strangely teenagers dressed these days; what did they call themselves – hippies? Not fifteen years younger than him, and yet already he didn’t understand them. They were right about one thing, though; James never stopped wondering at how astonishingly beautiful Wendy was, and how her large blue eyes only had time for him. He was so very much in love with her. He picked up the shopping bags, and followed her out into the bitter, east wind morning.