

A Family Affair

I do not expect an existential experience when I go to Laurent for a quick bite of lunch. As I have for many years, I only desire an almond croissant to relieve my hypoglycaemia, and a long *macchiato* to zap my brain into high gear.

But, perhaps because of advancing age and this changing life of mine, I find current events unexpectedly trigger memories which I would have expected to be long buried in oblivion. I recall people saying this is what happens in old age. I wonder if this is what they call second childhood.

The café is unremarkable for a bustling lunch time. There, around the tables on the pavement, sit the young smokers, the real estate agents and a tourist or two. I go inside, the more civilized section. I breathe in the old European coffee house atmosphere. I smell the freshly baked French and Danish pastries as they waft in their multi-toned sweetness from the display cabinet under the counter. Here is a one-eyed apricot slice, there a moon-shaped poppy-seed roll, between them a coffee scroll which I like to spool out and, unobserved, dip its sticky neck into my coffee.

The aroma of coffee envelops the large room. And here it is, what I was talking about- an image of my father taking me as a young child with him to the *Carlton* coffee house in the centre of Bratislava, comes to my mind. Men drinking coffee evokes peace, comfort. I would dip my coffee scroll into cocoa, while they would go through their rituals of smoking and drinking the black stuff.

What I remember most, is that they are all very kind to me. Sometimes they would all turn to me, and ask those questions children never know how to answer. But I do not mind, because of the benevolence they exude, and my father is smiling. And somehow, whatever I say seems to be clever. Those were the days when men taught boys the business of life. I felt that they were grooming me for adult life in the distant future.

Looking around me now, I notice the usual inside clientele. Two lanky young women in leather coats meet in a muted embrace, obviously sisters glad to see each other, but brought up not to show an excess of emotion. I hear the voice of the young woman next to my table just a bit too loud giving her opinions on relationships. "Girls should never go out with married men. They are only looking for trouble if they do." She is trying to impress the man sitting opposite her. At the table beyond them are three businessmen in intense discussion. The usual sprinkling of past middle aged women doing their social rounds, and a couple of gentlemen reading the papers complete a familiar picture. Oh, but look now at the table diagonally opposite me.

Smack in the middle of the café, oblivious to the rest, is a family comprising four souls. Three of them are totally preoccupied with the fourth member.

They are all huddled around half a small round table. On either side I see the profiles of an elderly couple, forming a curve within which sits a woman, her back to me. She has a child on her lap. Her left arm is wrapped around the shoulder of the child, holding her securely. Her right hand feeds the child and herself. I only see the golden

locks of the child, and think of Goldilocks. Goldilocks seems to be very content. It is on her that they all concentrate.

I look more closely at the man. He has a big squarish face, in which age struggles with the remnants of youth's assuredness. His thinning and receding grey hair is swept back in a fifties style, its neatness suggesting a touch of gel to hold it in place. He wears a comfortable green jumper, same coloured trousers, and brown suede shoes.

As he looks at what must be his grandchild, his face brims benevolence, though to a mature eye his expressions and movements are sometimes uncertain. To the child, he must appear as God. He is the head of the holy family, who provides dainty goodies through his ministering angels, the waiters. I now see beneath the table his sagging belly, with accentuated middle age spread. I wonder whether to the child the belly is Buddha-like, or at least consistent with Santa's.

The woman opposite him smiles in a matronly way on her progeny. Her grey hair is tinted discreetly with streaks of blue, held very firmly in place, coiffured probably that morning. A tuft of hair neatly arranged horizontally just above her brow makes me suspect that she is thinning in that region. Her dress is carefully stylish for her age, and her sagging belly is held in place, I suspect by an old fashioned corset. I get the feeling that she does not see the man as God, but rather a man with more frailties than she cares for in humans, someone knowledgeable about the sweat under his armpits and the colour of his underpants. She nevertheless seems to appreciate the familiarity with him, and the fact that they produced this daughter and grand-daughter together. The child appears to like her.

The mother has long fair hair, a black jacket, and jeans. I cannot see any more, but I like her youthful figure, and the concept of Madonna in jeans.

The blissful scene suddenly evaporates. Mother stands up, the child who I now see is about two and a half, stands in a vacuum next to the empty chair. As the mother leaves to go to the toilet, she turns and I see the front of her jacket now, stylish, with three smart steel zips. But her nose is too pert, her hair is a little unkempt, and her face a little too made up, perhaps to soften her burdened look. Her eyes are a little too glazed. A real mother, probably with two other children at home.

Grandfather disappears into the distance to pay at the counter. Grandma is replacing her lipstick after the meal. Nor is the abandoned child a perfect Goldilocks, especially now as she starts to pout.

I admire the little child's restraint. It pays off, as her world is now reconstituting. Grandfather has returned, and mother is sitting down again. The child snuggles her body and face into her side. But the magic of the universe admiring her every movement is gone. Now I see her whisper something to her grandfather. He nods indulgently, gets up, leads her by the hand to the counter, and they return with a double scoop of ice cream in a cone, and a cherry on top.

Mother lifts her on her lap again, grandmother puts down her handbag, and the three are once more absorbed in the child and her melting ice cream.

I cheer for this child, and want to embrace her. I am in wonder at how she managed to extend the event whose impression I know will stand her in good stead throughout her life.

I look out the window and see life passing by. When I look back, the family is gone.

I remember that in two days' time, I will be a grandfather.