

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

A New Leaf

by Nick Barrett

I feel guilty, God knows, about all sorts of things, but not about...well perhaps I do feel guilty about that. Maybe I'm beating myself up for nothing, I don't know, you can decide.

It was a familiar start to a routine day at the office. I left home early to enjoy a walk through the park in the hazy morning light, my favourite time of day, before the fumes and noise of city traffic spoil the peace.

Leaving the park where the chestnut trees were in full leaf, the colours seeming more beautiful than ever this year in the early Autumn sun, I crossed an empty street, leaving the shade of the park behind. I picked up a free newspaper from a stand where there used to stand the paper man - that's all we ever called him - calling out headlines, briskly taking cash and giving change, as obsolete now as the broadsheet papers he used to sell.

Change was in the air and I was in the mood for something different. There was a cafe I never used before at the corner facing the park, windows shaded with trees that lined the streets around here, Limes I thought. I peered in the large etched glass window and through the slightly steamy glass I could see there were plenty of free seats at those zinc topped small round tables that remind me of long ago holidays abroad. I went in for a breakfast of coffee and croissant.

An instant after sitting down an attractive olive skinned woman, in her 30's, grey flecked dark hair, a bit taller than average height I thought, came from behind the mahogany bar and asked me in a heavily accented voice - Spanish? South American? - what I would like. It was when she put my coffee down in front of me that I noticed her hands.

Her right hand was small and delicate, with fingers that I fancied could be used to paint miniatures of exotic flora and fauna of whatever part of the world she came from onto expensive ceramic vases or ornamental plates. Or perhaps the fingers of a musician, a violinist or viola player. I was shocked when I saw her left hand that carried the plate with my croissant. The back of her hand was welted with scar tissue covering every inch of surface. She had no fingernails. Three of the fingers were horribly twisted, as if reset by a rank amateur after being broken.

She performed her task with a smile and turned away to greet another early morning customer. I was too stunned by the sight of that hand even to say thank you, although I was burning with a desire to ask what had happened. Who could have done such a thing, and why? I was sure it had not been an accident there was a perverted art behind the torment that must have been inflicted.

Desperate to extend our encounter I blurted out, "excuse me, I asked for an Americano, this is Cappuccino." She turned around, looking slightly surprised at my lie. I was already composing a sympathetic remark for when she would return with my coffee, to strike up a relationship, perhaps over several weeks that could develop to a point where I could inquire about her hand.

For some reason she seemed flustered by her mistake and seemed to grab at the coffee with her damaged left hand, the nearest, at the same time as I tried to lift it towards her. We mishandled this somehow and the cup of coffee slid off its saucer, smashing on the floor, widely splashing the milky contents.

Her apologies to me were profuse. The owner or manager, a moustachioed, large boorish looking man wearing a long striped apron, rushed out to inspect the damage and spoke to her quickly and harshly in whatever tongue it was they used; Spanish, but not quite Spanish. She answered back, just as harshly it sounded.

I tried to insist that it was my fault but they both ignored me. I stood up not knowing quite what to do and just walked out of the cafe, accidentally without paying. Nobody followed.

She remained on my mind. Two weeks later I returned, now with Autumn rain and tree leaves falling, but she wasn't there, a young man was waiting on the tables. Had I cost her her job? Maybe she had the cost of the cup and my breakfast deducted from her wages?

I asked the waiter where the waitress was, if this was her day off. He looked at me sharply and just as sharply said in a similar accent to hers, “don’t ask questions about her, OK, she is not your business.”

I walked crestfallen towards my office, preoccupied with thoughts of whether she was in some trouble that I had added to. A sudden strong gust of wind whipped up a large wet chestnut leaf that felt like a slap as it hit my face.