

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Flat Whites

by MaryPat Campbell

I landed in London on a wintry autumn evening, and was greeted by the smell of stale air blowing horizontally across the arrival platform. I found myself in the middle of a hubbub of well wrapped up, damp people walking in every direction, sounding muffled and strident all at the same time. They all looked like they knew where they were going, and I wished I could disappear among them.

I parked myself at one of those brightly lit coffee stands in the station concourse, my bags around my feet like waifs and strays and waited to see if he would come.

It was all arranged, he'd contacted me and I'd replied. A flat white coffee sat in front of me, all froth and smelling faintly of dishwater. The moist air was a mixture of heat and sweat and clammy bodies. I must've sat there for about an hour and was beginning to lose my concentration, as I looked around in all directions for someone I wasn't sure I would recognise.

Gradually my eyes settled on a young man standing about ten feet in front of me. Just standing there, hands in his pockets, wearing an old denim jacket and a scarf round his neck. As my eyes focused I saw that he was looking intently at me. My heart raced. He was taller than I imagined, looser in his limbs, not exactly handsome but striking I thought. He carried a small sporty looking rucksack over one shoulder, with what looked like a badminton racket sticking out the top. I saw him in my mind's eye, running lightly around the court, the soles of his trainers making squeaking sounds on the sprung floor, the whack of the shuttlecock bouncing around the court.

I sat bolt upright and looked over at him, nodding my head in acknowledgement. He started to walk slowly towards me, people criss-crossing his pathway in all directions. It looked as if he was there for a split second and then not, like a strobe light in a discotheque as he approached me across the concourse.

“Hello John, is that you?” I said, and was surprised to hear my voice sound more wobbly and weak than I had intended.

He looked nervous and didn't reply. I stood up and indicated the seat opposite mine at the table. He moved with his shoulders bent forward, looking as if he would rather be anywhere else but here, removed his rucksack and scarf, and sat down opposite me.

“It feels a bit weird,” he said. “I've been wanting to meet you for ages, and now you're here, and.....” His voice trailed off.

“I don't know what to say to you,” he added without looking at me. I had planned so many things I wanted to say to him but now I couldn't remember any of them.

I could feel no immediate recognition, no sense of a deep bond between us, no slow motion smile like you sometimes see in films. I wanted to say something meaningful, to welcome him and show him that I was desperate to feel comfortable about meeting him at last. I also worried that there would be no way of getting through the awkwardness of it all.

We sat together, John and I, in the middle of Euston Station quietly drinking our flat whites, each of us hoping the other would break the loud silence.