

It's just a cup of coffee

'Here's your coffee.' Deepu sat the steaming cup in front of Brenda and smiled.

For more months than Brenda could count, this was sometimes the only human contact she would have all day. She had moved to Deal from her birth home of Bexley a year ago. Like many before her she had dreamed of a home by the sea. She pondered on how many had been drawn lemming like to the water's edge. Perhaps for her, her move was ten years too late. Her dream of gathering a new group of friends with a wide range of interests had swept out to sea on the tide. Why she had thought it would be any different to her previous life was optimistic bordering on the naive.

She had worked for the same small clothing company as a book keeper for over 20 years and did not have a wide circle of friends. She had been widowed at the age of 60 and her work became her lifeline and probably the reason she had continued working until she was 75. Her marriage had been very happy. She and John never felt the need of the company of others and spent most of their spare time together. They never joined clubs, preferring to read or go for long walks or holidays. On her move to the Kent coast Brenda had braved one local club but in her mind it was a mitigated disaster. As she walked in she felt questioning eyes turn to inspect her. She couldn't help but think she had walked into a bad western where when the stranger walked through the saloon doors the piano stopped playing and all chat ceased. She went to one table asking if I was ok to join them. Apparently she could but she would have to sit on Mary's chair just for today. Mary was having her cataracts done so would be back next week. Brenda didn't go back next week telling herself the place was not for her as it was full of 'old people.'

It was hard to know just when Brenda had been shrouded by the invisibly cloak of old age. Was it in a bus queue when others had pushed passed her to board first, was it in a busy shop when late comers had been served first, or was it at the counter of the noisy coffee chain that she felt anonymous? Perhaps it was the doctor saying of her painful joints it goes with the territory of old age. Brenda had taken to riding on the local buses primarily for something to do but perhaps subconsciously for some form of interaction with others. On a good day she could strike up a conversation with another weary sole. These precious encounters inevitably ended with a 'well this is my stop, it was good to chat, goodbye'. Brenda had once even got off the bus one stop earlier than she had wanted just in order to carry on a conversation. Sadly, this was fruitless as her talking buddy had taken her key from her bag and disappeared into her house. Brenda was left to trudge into town on foot. If it was raining she didn't get off the bus, staying on for the circular journey back to Deal from Canterbury. She would stare through the tear stained windows into the passing houses wondering at the lives lived behind the curtains.

Deepu had moved to Deal from her home in Leicester three years earlier. Her parents' marriage was arranged and had been very successful. Her mother's family had fled Uganda and her father's family were from south India. She had spent many happy holidays in a small village on the outskirts of Kerala. Her family was very close knit but she always feared she too would have a marriage arranged for her. All the time her mother was there she was protected from a marriage that she did not want. However when her mother passed away there was pressure from the extended family for her to marry. So she ran away as far as her spirit and wallet could take her. That had turned out to be working at the Rendezvous Café in a back street of Deal. Home was now a small bedsit with just one window to the outside world. She put in a great deal of effort in order to make her room her sanctuary. Although it was sparsely furnished it had everything she needed. In particular, standing in one corner was what looked like an ancient dark wood wash stand. On it she created her shrine. A shrine to Krishna, Ram, Seeta, Lashman, Hanumen, Shiva, Mother Goddess and Ganesh. Deepu

followed the same ritual every day; she would shower and then pray to the deities for good health, prosperity, peace and harmony for all. She would then light divas and sing bhajan (hymns). She then felt ready to face the Rendezvous café.

Tired of her daily commute in search of companionship, Brenda now would sit at the Rendezvous Café each morning. She sat in the same seat with the same coffee, the same pocket sized crossword book. The heavy stones of loneliness sinking her deeper down in her chair.

The Rendezvous café was in a quiet back street of Deal. Not in the more vibrant part of the town where art galleries merged with artisan cafes selling a vast range of unpronounceable coffees at exorbitant prices. Here you could wait for the best part of your lunch break for macchiato, cortado or some other variation of the humble coffee bean. Gone are the days the only question asked was 'do you want milk with that?' Now you sit an oral exam of 20 questions. It was completely different at the Rendezvous where your cappuccino, latte or filter coffee would appear before you had a chance to open the menu. On which was a bewildering array of items that went with chips.

The rendezvous was clean but tired its grey décor forming perfect camouflage for Brenda. It had become her sanctuary.

One Saturday she was sat in her usual chair, in her usual corner dreading the next day when the café was closed. The thought of another barren Sunday stretching in front of her filled her with dread and sank her deeper into her chair. This day Brenda was glancing through a travel supplement in a discarded newspaper with a wondrous display of photos of India. Her thin lips pursed into a vacant, distant smile as she peered through her round rimless glasses. Deepu had brought over Brenda's coffee and saw some familiar pictures. 'That's Kerala!' Brenda was shocked into unexpected conversation. 'Yes it's beautiful, I've been there several times. 'Me too, that's where my family are from. I've been many times but mainly confined to visiting family. Have you been anywhere else in India?' Brenda had been on holiday there with John 4 times and loved the culture, the people and most of all the food. Of course she had started with the golden triangle of New Delhi, Agra and Jaipur including of course the Taj Mahal. But it had been Kerala that stole their hearts.

'Would you mind if I joined you as I'm due a break now?' Of course Brenda didn't mind.

This was the first of many happy conversations. Both ladies looking forward each day to meeting. Deepu always took her break when Brenda was there, joining her for coffee. Brenda would regale Deepu with stories of river trips on thatched roofed boats, visits to tea plantations, an elephant sanctuary etc. 'it's amazing what you've seen. I only saw a fraction of that.' Sighed Deepu. Brenda said it was the same for her and London. 'When it's on your doorstep you never visit tourist places! They had found something in each other they each desperately needed. They would talk over shared interests; mainly their love of India and Indian food but also of walking. 'I love to go for a walk but it's not the same when you are on your own' ventured Brenda. Deepu nodding her agreement bravely suggested they meet on a Sunday and go for a walk along the pier. She too felt the tiresome length of Sundays dragging. 'There's a new Indian restaurant I'd love to try but don't want to go in on my own. Would you like to try it? Let me get you another cup of coffee while you decide'

This was more than just cup of coffee. This was liquid kindness, friendship in a cup, compassion and most of all it was hope.