

It is still worth painting the portrait of a couple when they are old

The train pulled up to the platform at the same spot as always. There is something timeless about a railway station. Facades can come and go, but the basic structure doesn't change. Points direct trains from the South onto the same platform as they did when John was a child, as they will do when he no longer cares. The trip was always the same, John could recite the stations along the East coast like the words of a child's song.

His father still called his home phone before a journey to check that everything was set, even though the rest of the world had stopped doing that kind of thing. It was unnecessary but still felt good, in the years ahead he would come to miss it.

He got out of the carriage and walked towards the same angled view of the staircase as always. His father was waiting just beyond the barrier. John picked out his profile before he could make out the features on his face. The line down his back, the tilt of his head. He would know him by his shadow. He was only half way there when they greeted each other with a small wave and a smile. There was the same wrinkling of skin above the nose. If they had known each other less well that next fifty metres would have been awkward, but with such familiarity John could instead just enjoy the moment, looking at a favourite portrait in its familiar frame.

Four months later, when he returned for the funeral, the absence of that figure beyond the barrier was the moment that was hardest, most poignant of all. As if his home town had lost a great monument. The Cathedral fallen.

After John passed through the turnstile they greeted each other with a mix of handshake and hug. After all this time they couldn't settle on which was best, but it was smiles all round so it didn't matter. He had spent more than half of his life in the Cotswolds and felt rooted in the rock itself, but still this was coming home. Human nature can be so odd.

He looked across at the man in front of him. Michael Thomas looked old in his eyes and the lines on his face, but his stance was still upright and correct. His generation was like that. The wrinkles of age show a body's nature openly, there is no hiding behind them. Michael smiled naturally, creasing well worn lines. His hair no longer bore even a trace of what colour it once was. He was dressed in clothes which his forefathers would have chosen, well worn with

the creases of age themselves. Although never stout he now fell away from them and you could not quite identify where his arm or leg was behind the cloth. He wore sensible shoes and smelt softly of the family home. Like the railway station his skin had weathered over the years but structurally he never changed.

The taxi ride back to the house was a chance for small talk. They had made it through that difficult period when Michael's driving had become a problem. He sat in the front seat, but only after a fuss,

"No, no, you sit there."

John sat in the back, the car drove straight and the conversation wandered.

When they got to the house John's mother came out into the hall. They embraced and where his father had smiled she talked.

"Lovely to see you. Did you have a good journey up? You can hang your coat there. How are Anna and the children?"

John tried to answer at least one of the questions but there was no gap into which to fit anything. He just grinned at the flow. Michael stood to one side and Elizabeth Thomas talked for both of them. It would finish soon enough and she would go back into the kitchen. She always responded to John's visits with tireless determination to provide.

Conversation continued around tea.

"Thank goodness the snow has gone. Joan next door had to drive me to the supermarket, I couldn't get down to the bus stop."

Elizabeth would narrate stories ceaselessly if given the chance. John had to make a conscious effort to contribute.

"We've had a fair amount of snow at home too. They had volunteers out clearing the pitch before the game two weeks ago."

No response to that. It was hard work making this a two way thing.

"Did I tell you about poor Simon Williams across the road? His memory is going now. He went out for a walk in the morning as usual and just didn't come back. He was gone for hours. She was frantic. They had a police car and everything. Normally of course the police don't come straightaway unless it is a child, but when she explained... They were very good. In the end he was found just down in Dee Street. They never did find out where he had been. It

makes it so difficult for her now. He still does go out sometimes but he can't be trusted. It's such a shame."

John was struggling to remember the people his mother talked about. He smiled across at his father. The two of them seemed to be sitting in silence in the midst of all these words.

When the cups and things were taken away Michael seemed to perk up and leant forward.

"Later this evening I want us to have a proper talk. We can take ten minutes after the meal."

"Of course," said John, "we should do that."

Only after she was widowed and alone in the house did John's mother stop filling it. Then space and silence crept into the place. Fully six months after his father's death John found himself standing by his side of the wardrobe. The room bore only faint echoes of him. John opened the door to see the empty space where his clothes had been and for the last time picked up the scent of him, recognised from just months before, and from childhood. It was a sweet moment, almost unbearable. He felt that by opening that door he had let go the last part of him.

That evening they had a proper meal in the dining room. Elizabeth served chicken curry, which was a modern concession from what her mother would have served. There were serving dishes and cups on saucers. John could remember the laughter when his daughter had asked what those little plates were when she was here in the summer. When he brought this up his father came to life. It was the first time he really joined the flow of talk.

"We enjoyed the card so much. It was lovely."

"It's all her own writing now," John replied. "I write the words down on a different sheet of paper and she copies them. She can do her own name of course."

"Wonderful. We remember her sitting here colouring at the table in the summer. It will be lovely to see her again soon."

He looked into middle distance. John preferred to think that he was looking not away from the conversation, but instead at his granddaughter colouring in at the table.

Elizabeth pointed to the card that was still on the sideboard with other grandchildren things, but her attention never rested anywhere for long. She spoke about the bus service not running so often.

"Does that make it harder to get into town?"

"Not really," Michael said. "We can always walk down to Hardings Road and catch the 17."

John was pleased to hear this, but later Michael talked about still needing his coat repaired and it was clear that he had not walked down to Hardings Road for a long time.

The following morning John took the bus into town himself. He needed to buy toiletries, or at least that was what he said. Really he wanted to get away for a bit but felt guilty because he had only just got there. He decided to buy a Scottish novel and take a slow coffee in a fast food place.

So much was new in town. He was relieved, tired of the desolate nostalgia that pulled him every time he turned around. The town clock had not changed, but all the shop fronts had.

He paused at the corner where the family shop had been, a rock throughout the first half of his life. People in town would orient themselves based on the place. In those days he thought that the shop was a permanent fixture, like the clock. Even after his father's retirement it was a refuge, but now everyone carried on without either of them.

The evening meal was just like the previous day. Same serving dishes, cups and saucers. They talked about John's visit to town,

"You'll have seen a lot of changes in Union Street."

John described the book he had picked up but not the coffee. Neither of his parents asked about it. He joked about the mobile phone stores that seemed to be on every block. He didn't mention their shop, that the young people walking past would never have known it, that its absence brought an actual, physical pain.

Michael was quiet. John mentioned the rugby team, wanting to draw conversation out of him, but even then it was just a few words.

"Not like 80's of course, but they have some good youngsters. They should do well in a few years time." Always the same. When are these promising youngsters ever going to grow up?

Elizabeth spoke about her friend who was now tied to the house because her husband would go wandering.

"Of course I told you about that yesterday. Did the bus go the same route as before?"

"Yes," said John, "it went same route as always."

The next morning he took his seat on the train home. He had said his final goodbyes, promised to come back with the whole family in the summer. There were gifts for the children, from both of them, bought by his mother. He had hugged them both and told them that he would see them soon.

John picked up his novel and looked forward to speaking with his father that evening. He knew that he would call the home phone to make sure that the train had arrived safely.