

Trading Places

I arrive first in our usual City cafe. I always do. Anne believes her customary lateness is endearing and it suits me to let her think that.

We have been going out for over two years, living separately for now but I think we have a future together.

I take the table by the window with the large mirror opposite. I can indulge my inner spy, watch both directions along the street and most of the café too. Sometimes, there are people I'd like to avoid and forewarned I can escape via the catering area.

I sip my second Americano, swiping my mobile screen and glancing out the window occasionally. Finally, I see Anne in her bright red dress a 100 yards off, more than twenty minutes late and in no hurry. She's talking to someone walking alongside her but they are too close to the wall for me to see them until too late.

When Anne comes into the café I recognise her companion immediately, a blonde, late twenties, and very attractive. We spent just one night together but will she remember me? No escape possible now. A tight situation. A trader's world. I take deep breaths, struggling to think how I might avoid recognition or play dumb. Maybe the beard will help, I didn't have it last year. Glasses? I wear them to read. I put them on quickly and ruffle my hair.

Anne waves from the coffee queue, pointing me out to her friend, and gesturing to ask if I want another drink. I force a smile and shake my head.

"This is Kaarina, she's joined our team on a secondment from the Helsinki office," Anne says as she reaches my table. "I thought I'd help her get to know people. Kaarina, this is my partner, John."

I have to speak. "Hi Kaarina, welcome to London and the City Jungle. I am sure Anne will help you spot the wild animals." I look directly at her. I see she knows me but her smile signals collusion.

I need to leave as soon as I can. Kaarina's perfume is triggering flashbacks of a crazy disco and that night of passion under the midnight sun. Anne mustn't see the colour rising in my face. She knows I was in Helsinki last year.

I glance at my watch.

"Oh, I didn't realise it's this late. I have a meeting in ten minutes. Sorry ladies, I'll have to love and leave you now."

What a Freudian slip. Not the phase to use with two of your lovers. Anne just nods, she knows she was late but Kaarina's eyes say more. Complicity I am sure yes, but something else I think. Am I being egotistic, or did I just see an invitation?

I wave as I pass the café window outside. There's that look from Kaarina again. My unease changes to guilty excitement. We City Traders thrive on risk and I forecast new options in my Futures Market.