

A tense relationship

HE IS authentic, now, enjoy-the-moment, live-for-the present. She? She was traditional, she cherished things. She was aware of her heritage, of what had shaped her, what had led to who she was. The attraction? Who knows? But they were a couple for a while, besotted at first, then calmer, then perhaps more off than on, until they agree and agreed on what is obvious to him and was obvious to her, that they had no future together.

His friends are like him, her friends were like her. His friends think that his new girlfriend is dull and uninspiring, staid, fusty, and one jokes he's surprised she agreed to sex. They have many notions of her which are not true. Her friends were also unimpressed with her new man. They thought him shallow, too in thrall to novelty. They disliked his tendency to move, move, move before moving is necessary or even advised. So more and more his friends shun her, and when he suggests they meet with one or two, she cried off. Nor does he feel comfortable when they meet with her friends, and soon it is and was just the two of them.

'Go on see that new Tarantino?' he says, 'we can go Monday, it's student discount day.'

'Maybe,' she said, 'maybe.'

'You're not too bothered?'

'I was thinking we could catch some of the Fellini retrospective at the arts centre.'

'Really? Nah, old hat.'

'Old hat? But so many directors rate him and say they learned a lot from him.'

'Which is why we should see their films, not his.'

She was studying history and spent a lot of time reading. She was still amazed how again and again human behaviour perpetuated itself through the ages, that nothing really changed. Skirt lengths rose and fell, values came in and out of fashion, but greed, rivalry, love, ambition, regret, miscalculation, betrayal and so much else were constants. She once tried to explain her enthusiasm for the past to him, but he is not interested.

'Old hat, just loads of idiots killing each other,' he says.

He is on a new course, a college innovation, which examines the structures, protocols, synergies and transnational economics of the games industry. He plays a lot of games in his room and when she called and he is sitting there, almost in a trance, blasting this character and that to oblivion, she never stayed long.

'Just a load of idiots killing each other,' she once said, but he is too wrapped by the noisy mayhem he can cause to hear.

Both young, in so many ways he is far younger, and when she took him for a long weekend to meet her parents, her father was dismissive.

‘I doubt that young man will ever grow up,’ her father told her later when she rang to thank again for the visit. ‘He’ll still be a juvenile in his old age.’ Her mother was less outspoken, but just as unenthusiastic. She said nothing, but saying nothing said a lot.

He says he’d like her to meet his dad and his dad’s new partner and arranges the trip. This is then called off, not once but twice, before it goes ahead. She was a little surprised that his dad’s new partner was also a man, but only because she thought something might have been said.

‘It wouldn’t have been possible thirty years ago, or even twenty,’ he tells her, ‘that’s an advance and we’re all the better for it.’

His father and the new partner run an ‘out-there’ soul experience business, organising rugged camping trips to the mountains where men can test and find their real selves.

‘It’s very, basic, very,’ he tells her, ‘they’re taken up, given a basic tent and a bag of simple food and one or two tools and then have get on with it. They can’t keep their phones or anything. It’s incredible, the personal growth, the awareness, some hate it, but most again and again, they say it makes them feel real, really, really real. I know it’s just for men, but I’m sure there are similar trips for women. You should try it.’

‘No,’ she told him, ‘no thanks.’

‘You see that’s where we’re too different, you -’

‘Too different?’

‘Well, we are, aren’t we, he says, ‘you’ve always got your nose stuck in a book and you just don’t seem to take in what’s happening.’

But she did. She told him it was over and he agrees.