

Ice

The radio was on – Fleetwood Mac. An approving cheer rose up from the table in the centre of the room, around which twenty or so people were sitting. A family reunion – or, in fact, just a union, since there appeared to be a number of new family members, seated apart from the main group, at a little red plastic trestle table. Earlier on, I had asked my mum to whom they all belonged, and she had directed my eyes about the table in telling me. That one's Robert's daughter – Who's Robert? – Your cousin, over there – He's old. Whose son is he? – Your aunt Margaret's. The wine flowed; soon we were through five, six, seven bottles. I looked across at my dad, who was settled at the other side of the table, face red from the alcohol and Welsh accent quickly returning. My dad became confessional when drunk, loose-tongued. Business secrets were slipping out, those which remained top secret at home. He seemed more comfortable here, although whether that was the effect of the wine, I couldn't tell.

“So, Sally, what kind of music do you listen to?” This from a white-haired man seated directly opposite me. He was the husband of my aunt Pat, and the question was aimed at my mum.

Ever an awkward question. You never knew what inferences a person might take from your music taste, which sometimes led you to declare yourself the number one fan of the blandest, most inoffensive music about. I saw my mum hesitating. And then –

“Well, I like a lot of different music, but I don't suppose you'd know it.”

Already, the affront was clear. And now, a challenge, pay-back, from Uncle Jim. “Hey! Don't make assumptions. Tell me. See if I know.”

There was no way out now from causing offense. Don't make assumptions. That was the first, and most important, rule of getting along with people. Or, at least, don't vocalise them. My mum had done just that.

“Well, for example, I like Mozart's Requiem.”

Triumphantly, Jim cried, “I do know that! Listen to it a lot, actually. See! Don't make assumptions. We're not philistines, you know.”

“I just wasn't sure...” The reversal from my mum. Her tone was conciliatory, yet also, to a certain extent, defensive. Don't blame me. Anyone else in my position would have assumed the same. You left school at fourteen. You work in a factory. Why would you know Mozart's Requiem?

Then Jim said, “Don't worry. I'm only teasing.” And back to the food and the wine.

Still, my mum was not pacified, so twenty minutes later, with a nudge to my arm, she requested that I go out for a short walk with her. My sister accompanies us. My mum's face was drawn until we arrived on the next street, when tears begin to wet her face. There isn't, and never has been, anything more tragic than seeing one's mother cry. Indeed, the greatest disappointment, on growing up, is realising that your parents, despite your youthful assumptions, were just like you: worried; fearful; broken. Human.

My sister was crying too; something else must have happened. And thus began the tirade, the collaborative delineation of the various offenses of my dad's side of the family. My dad was working class. He had grown up in a council estate in south Wales. There hadn't been a single book in the family home; TV had been the principal form of diversion. He had been the first person in his family to go to university, taking the train from Cardiff to Manchester in 1980, armed with a single backpack. Two years later, he had met my mum – middle class through and through, the daughter of Marxist academics, whose house was stuffed with books, floor-to-ceiling. They had married, settled in a leafy suburb of Manchester, and from then on, we would return to Wales intermittently to maintain the ties with my dad's family. But my dad's side of the family and my mum's (to which, in reality, the children of our family belonged) were not reconcilable, their respective cultures serving up no common ground. To my dad's side of the family, we were prim and prudish, with my and my sister's vegetarianism, and my mum's abstention from my Welsh family's bacchanalian drinking. To us – or more particularly, to my mum – my dad's side of the family were indulgent, materialistic, and shallow. "Some people just talk and talk and don't say a thing," my mum complained that day.

In fact, my dad's side of the family had reason to look down on us. My uncle's house, the setting of the great drama between my Uncle Jim and my mum that day, was more large and sumptuous than anything we could make a claim to in Manchester. My cousin Jay and his wife lived in Beverley Hills. My uncle's story was truly rags-to-riches, as he had built up, over the course of forty years, a large company that produced parts for the mobility industry – a very lucrative industry, judging from my uncle's home. My uncle was then settled into part-retirement, sucking from the sap of life that capitalism, in her great bounteousness, had afforded him. He had a house in Spain, and one in the south of France, to which we repaired a month after the Mozart's Requiem Incident. It was so big that, in the taxi on the way from the station, we had spent many minutes going up and down the street, looking for something that could possibly be his home, before it occurred to us that the mini-mansion at the top of the hill was our destination.

On the first night in France, when the wine was flowing once more ("It's alright if you only do it once in a while," was the defence of my uncle), my uncle delivered to us his primary maxim which would ensure survival in a foreign country. "In Spain, the one thing you gotta know, it's that when you're in a restaurant, you just gotta say "yellow". That's it. That'll do you."

After a moment, "Hielo? Ice?"

"Yes. Yellow," he repeated. "They understand that."

My mum looked a little shocked, though amused. She was a languages graduate, so such a laissez-faire attitude to language-learning seemed, to her, the epitome of British arrogance – an attitude that was inherited from British imperialism; the view that others ought to fit themselves around us, no matter where we were. But she didn't make any comment. My uncle and my mother would never smooth out their differences. Their casts of mind were almost directly opposing.

One week after, home, and a restoration of our values. Quorn sausages for tea, and my dad sobered up with a glass of water. The radio is turned on – Mozart's Requiem.

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