



Mochas and Me

WENDY KENNAR

I WAS PERFECTLY CONTENT TO DRINK A mugful of apple juice at breakfast. (I still am.) When I was a little girl, I would often sip slowly and blow on my juice, imitating my dad as he tried to cool down his mugful of coffee before taking a careful sip.

I didn't become curious about coffee until my last couple of years of high school. Suddenly it felt like coffee was much more than just the "best part of waking up," as Folgers liked to say in their catchy television commercials. Coffee had risen in status to something much cooler than the instant coffee my mom made for my dad each morning before he went off to work. I started seeing an increasing number of coffee-related beverages on menus—drinks like espresso, cappuccino, latte, and mocha. I didn't know one from the other, but felt certain that during college I would become the kind of young adult who regularly visited a coffeehouse—a term much more in style with an establishment that would serve these fancy coffee drinks as opposed to a coffee shop where I might order two

eggs over easy, hash browns, a side of toast, and a glass of water. Coffeehouse visits, over time, would naturally help me learn to differentiate among these drinks. I just had to be patient and wait for college.

Back then, almost thirty years ago now, I couldn't wait to finish high school and let my real life start. As a high school junior and senior, I daydreamed and fantasized, jumping ahead to the future. I tried to imagine my life as an independent adult, no longer living in my parents' house. I planned to leave home for college. Naturally, I would have a serious boyfriend (or two) during my college years. Marriage and motherhood would happen, but sometime far down the line; I felt no rush for any of that. I wanted to know the pleasure of having not just a bedroom to myself (growing up I shared a room with my sister) but a whole apartment. I wanted to establish myself in my hoped-for teaching career. I wanted to figure out who I was when I wasn't first described as someone's daughter, someone's sister, or someone's student. I wanted to live my life.

I didn't have real-life role models to look up to. So I looked to others—characters in books and movies—for guidance. I found one such example in *Father of the Bride*, starring Steve Martin and Diane Keaton. The movie was released in 1991. I was a high school sophomore at the time, and I remember seeing the movie with my dad at a neighborhood cineplex. I watched Annie Banks (played by Kimberly Williams-Paisley) return to her home in southern California after spending a semester studying abroad in Italy. She returns home engaged, and on the night her parents meet the groom-to-be, the soon-to-be-married couple decide to go out for a cappuccino.

My dad saw Annie Banks as a version of me, his daughter. A young woman who far too soon, in his eyes, would replace our daddy-daughter dates with dates with young men. I saw Annie as a possibility of what I might be like in just a few years. I, too, would return home to southern California after studying abroad; I would live and study in France. I also would be passionate about my career and expect a

romantic partner to support my dreams, just as Annie's fiancé, Bryan, supports hers. However, I didn't think I would marry at Annie's young age of twenty-two. Though I did promise my dad that when the time came, I would not want swans waddling around a tulip border at my wedding—something the wedding planner suggests for Annie's movie wedding.

But I hadn't yet learned what happens when you go around making grand life plans like that. I hadn't yet learned that life happens, and plans change.

Paul was not the first man I dated, but he was—he is—the first man I loved romantically. We knew each other from a high school English class and occasionally saw each other on the campus of the community college we attended. Community college had never been my dream, but it all came down to financial practicalities. I was responsible for paying for my own college education, which meant I attended community college to save money before transferring to a four-year university. As the first in my family to attend college, I did not



have a college fund of any sort to assist with tuition, books, and related expenses.

During those community college years, I discovered my favorite coffeehouse. Stir Crazy was a small, neighborhood spot, walking distance from my parents' house. This cozy coffeehouse had two window seats—perfect for when I planned to read—and small round tables scattered about—perfect for when I planned to write. It served large mugs of hot beverages, much like I saw on my favorite television show at the time, *Friends*.

Paul asked for my phone number—twice. He admitted to misplacing it after the first request, and I remember teasing him a bit during the second request. I borrowed my mom's car for our first date—and all subsequent dates. Neither of us owned a car at that time. Paul was working in the family shoe store, and we planned on getting a coffee after the store closed and before going to the movies. Except this was our first date, and I wasn't ready to share my favorite coffeehouse just yet. Instead, we went to a local Starbucks and

looked through the newspaper, but none of the movies really seemed worthy of our limited college-era finances. Instead, we sat in Starbucks for three hours, finishing our café mochas but keeping the cups on our small table so we could linger.

Now, after almost twenty-five years of marriage, we talk fondly of our first date and the “best café mochas of our lives.” And each year, we commemorate the anniversary of our first date with a café mocha date—Starbucks or otherwise.

Paul and I have never been a couple who observe regular date nights; they didn't fit into our family schedule. When our son was born, and for the first several years of our son's life, I was an elementary school teacher while Paul worked in retail. Instead of dates, we have found ways to meet regularly for coffee. When our son started kindergarten, I retired from my teaching career for medical reasons. Suddenly, Paul and I had a weekday off together, just the two of us during school hours. That day became our couple time, which we often used for chores and practical things like taking the car in for an oil



change, getting our taxes done, and going to the optometrist for our yearly exams. And sometime during that day, we also made time for coffee.

As our son has gotten older, more independent and more self-sufficient, we have started leaving him at home for an hour or so while we go out for a coffee date. Even though we now own two cars, we still prefer to walk to a neighborhood café, where the sandwich and salad menus are too extensive to call the place a coffeehouse. I am the predictable partner, ordering a café mocha when I want a warm beverage and blended mocha when I want a cold beverage. Paul is more adventurous when it comes to food and drink. I'm never certain what he'll order.

Sometimes the practical part of my brain tries to make the emotional part of my brain feel guilty about the amount of money we spend on coffee-related drinks. I have come to realize, however, that those drinks are more than coffee drinks. They represent an opportunity to slow down, to wait a few minutes while the barista prepares our drinks, to gratefully accept our to-

go cups, and walk around the neighborhood a bit before sampling our beverages. And when we do, we take slow, careful sips. And the whole time, Paul and I hold hands, we talk, we listen, we enjoy each other's company and the simple pleasures these coffee dates give us.

My life has certainly not gone as I had planned all those years ago—not better and not worse, just different. Paul and I got married shortly before our twenty-third birthdays. I never did live in an apartment by myself. Paul and I did travel to Paris, France, shortly before our thirtieth birthdays. I did, and still do, regularly visit a favorite coffeehouse for some alone time; I call it my Wendy-writing-time. And I learned that I'm not a fan of coffee on its own; I need some chocolate to make it Wendy-friendly, as we call it. Hence, my preference for mochas.

One thing that didn't change: I kept my promise made all those years ago to my dad; there were no swans waddling around a tulip border at our wedding. ✨