

The Doorway

A doorway is often used as a symbol of opportunity – pass through here and your prospects will be improved; that is the message. In day-to-day life though, a doorway is just one of those places where the distance we keep between ourselves and others is sharply reduced, just as it is when we enter a lift, or take a seat on a bus. We move close to strangers and then quickly restore the space that we like to keep around us. A chance encounter in a doorway does not become an opportunity.

On a Thursday afternoon in late June Ana entered a small convenience store on the south side of the Brompton Road, one of the last shops before you reach the Rembrandt Hotel and the museums, if you are heading west. She was feeling empty and needed something to sustain her before paying a final visit to the Victoria and Albert Museum. Funds were low and she took time before deciding on a small packet of fig biscuits. She handed the exact money to the Indian shopkeeper and slipped the biscuits into her bag alongside the textbook that was the basis of the three-week course in English she had taken at the Regency College - a college, incidentally, that used the image of a doorway to promote its courses. This had been the last day in the classroom and the students were released earlier than usual. Tomorrow there would be a coach trip to Oxford and on Saturday she would fly home to Madrid.

She liked the quiet atmosphere of the V&A but was sad at the thought of spending her last afternoon there. She had dreamed that some nice boy would draw her into a summer romance on this visit to London, which her step-mother had opposed so fiercely. Ana was eighteen years old and some of her friends had been making educational trips since they were sixteen.

The digital clock behind the Indian man's counter was showing 3.47 when she turned and walked towards the door of the shop.

John had an appointment that afternoon at an Art Gallery on the north side of the Brompton Road. He was a student of Art History and had come seeking a work experience placement. The interview went well. The gallery was planning an exhibition of work by Edward Burra and John would help with the preparation. Burra was the painter he had chosen for his thesis. He emerged into the sunlight with a feeling of satisfaction and also, though he was not sure why, of anticipation. His grant had allowed him to rent a bed-sitter and move out of his Aunt Norah's house, where he had grown up. He was free of any attachment and his time was his own until Monday.

He spotted the small grocery store and crossed the road, intending to treat himself to something sweet before heading north, up Exhibition Road to the Serpentine.

At 3.48 Ana reached the doorway of the store just as John was entering with his mind on a chocolate fudge slice. They had to rotate their shoulders to edge through the narrow space. For a moment they were face-to-face and there passed between them a sensation, sudden and intense, that they both knew was more than mere attraction. In some mysterious way it was recognition. But they were strictly brought-up young people, both diffident by nature. They continued in their opposed directions.

John, now inside the shop, turned to push his way back to the door, but was impeded by some entering customers. By the time he reached the pavement she was nowhere to be seen.

Ana, unable by conditioning to linger in the hope of being picked up, had allowed herself to be carried along the pavement with the crowd that was heading for South Kensington Underground Station.

To notice an attractive member of the opposite sex and to pass by regretfully without contact was an experience familiar to these two young people. But what had passed between them in that doorway was different, something of themselves that they recognised in each other.

They were both gripped by a terrible sense of regret. Ana forgot about the museum and followed the crowd to the tube station. She took a train to Clapham South and walked the short distance to the house where she was lodging. John thought no more about chocolate fudge slices and walked for more than an hour with no sense of direction until he found himself sitting in a cinema, resting his limbs, unable to concentrate on the film.

On Friday morning Ana, after a restless night, got up too late to join the coach for Oxford. Her landlady had already left for work and she slowly went through the motions of washing and dressing and sorting her clothes for tomorrow's departure. She made toast and fried an egg. It would do for lunch as well as breakfast. Then she picked up her key from the hook by the front door and left the house for the station.

John's feet could take him in only one direction that day. He caught a train at Chalk Farm and, after changing at Leicester Square, emerged at Knightsbridge station.

At 3.35 they were both on the stretch of the Brompton Road that lies between Beauchamp Place and the Rembrandt Hotel, approaching the doorway that had come to represent opportunity lost, Ana from the west and John from the east. There were a lot of shoppers on the pavement that afternoon.

They were fifty yards apart when Ana spotted John, saw his eyes scanning the crowd. She was shielded by people taller than her, but then he saw her and his gaze ceased its searching. They gradually slowed their step; this time they would not pass each other by. They stopped, searched each other's faces. This was not just any boy-meets-girl scene, to be handled with forced charm and a chat-up line. There were no smiles. John turned in the direction that Ana had been taking and she moved forward to walk beside him. They reached Knightsbridge and entered the park, communicating with shy but reassuring glances. Words had played no part in bringing them together and neither was inclined to hurry towards conversation.

Their first words were spoken when they came to an ice cream van, and Ana said to John, 'You speak English?' They laughed when they found that they lacked a language in which to communicate. Ana had mixed with other Spanish students at the college and had failed to pick up much English. She lacked the confidence to speak up and learn by making mistakes. John spoke no Spanish.

They sat on the grass eating their ice creams and then lay back in the warm sunshine. They turned to face each other and remained like that for a long time, at much the same distance as that which had separated them in the shop doorway. Their eyes explored each other's features, and slowly they began to smile. Then John gently took her chin in his hand and drew her face towards him.

Many summers have passed since that day. The convenience store on the Brompton Road has been replaced by a designer clothes shop whose sliding glass doors open wide, permitting the customers to pass in and out without coming into close proximity.

The recognition that John and Ana had felt was not an illusion. What they showed each other in the shop doorway was the consequence of what they could not reveal. It was that shadow that each had sensed in the other and in time they would come to know the hidden pain that they shared. They had been two motherless children.

Sometimes, with the preoccupations of day to day life, they would lose the habit of looking into each other's eyes. Then, by chance, they would coincide in one of the doorways of their house. They would stop and search each other's faces and remember a Thursday afternoon in London, when opportunity was so nearly lost.