

AS IF

Something about London means no space is too small, no indignity too much to bear to save those five minutes before the next tube. Shuffling left, Ben slotted himself behind a small giant of a man who looked both determined and able to use his bulk to get his way: the teeth of a shark strategy, as when cleaner fish live in sharks' mouths as protection from other predators. It failed, as a small tide of people were sucked in front of the big man, filling the only space on the left of the doors he could occupy. But Ben was nimble, pivoting to his right and cutting in to join the tide even as washed up, with two people already stepping off as the doors tried to close. He took a deep breath and backed on, apologising profusely. It was downright rude, and the marginally good-looking woman convinced she had the door tried to gently push him off. But he pushed back and, that rare event, she actually spoke to him. Excuse me, she said. He was in, the doors closed, and they moved off, his face and hands plastered over the curved door, cartoon-like. At the next stop there was a minor miracle, as no-one got off from his door and no-one got on, though several darted left or right when they saw their prospects. Skilfully pulling his head in just before the door slid shut, safe for a minute, the pressure eased, and Ben managed a half turn.

Being almost exactly the same size, a tad small, they were literally eye to eye, two inches apart. Or five centimetres these days, when 28.3g of prevention is worth 0.454 kilos of cure. Another rare event on a London tube, though pretty unavoidable in the circumstances: they looked at each other. Both proud, unwilling to alter the natural circumstances that had occurred, neither turned away. She had lines around her eyes, bags even, though an effort had

clearly been made to disguise them with make-up. The rest of her face was unpainted. She was older than he had first thought, thirty-five perhaps, maybe more. Smooth skin and long hands were her eye-catching headlines, but frailty was the backstory. The age, the humanity, the hard work, the resilience. There was sadness in those eyes. Not tragedy or despair, just sadness, of boredom, of a life unlived, of going to work every day and coming home, of too-infrequent holidays, of unconsummated interests. For the first time in more than a day, Ben fell in love, instinctively adjusting his face to a clown-sympathetic smile. They were so close she couldn't even see it. Yet she smiled too. At the next station, as he was forced right, she subtly shifted right too, so they still faced each other, their smiles now visible. But now they could no longer look at each other without it being deliberate.

Hi, said Ben. He wasn't a Londoner, or any of that crap, so what the hell. He'd talked to strangers on buses, trains, planes and pavements in half the world's capitals, or a few of them at least. She smiled again. Next stop, the one before Ben's flat. Three stops later, they were almost the only two people standing. I get off next stop, she said. Her voice was heavy, much deeper than it should have been. Tinged. She had a northern accent. Unusually, as he considered himself something of an expert on northern accents, he couldn't immediately place it. She looked at him. He was wrong: the sadness was desperate. She'd never done this before, but she'd do it now. Maybe she had sensed more about him than he had of her. He got off too, following behind her two, three, steps. Her coat was heavy, a little too big for her, a little too much for the time of year, as it was late in May, the chill had gone, and warmth was threatening. She wanted to cover herself, wrap herself up in something. She was lost, she was lonely. Yet what is it about availability that can sometimes trump all else ? He was a step behind her. And there they were, in the outside world, the game at an end. Without turning

her head, she stopped on the threshold – one foot in, one foot out. He walked slowly around her, facing her, coming to rest the same two inches from her eyes; but now neither broke into a smile. Had the sun broken through, it would have been exciting, romantic even. It was raining. It was seedy.

There's a decent little restaurant five minutes walk away. Want some food ? So went one of London's more sporadic and unpredictable courtships, but firmly within the bounds of nice, civilised society, no ripping off satin bras and hanging naked off chandeliers. They walked quietly to their destination, at a determined pace, each trying to anticipate the other's steps. It wasn't difficult, and they quickly fell into a brisk rhythm, looking forward and occasionally down. Neither were ready to start a conversation. They had taken the important step of agreeing to converse, now they needed to wait for the coats to come off, the warmth and anonymity of having others around them, the acceptable formality of chairs underneath them and a table between.

I guess the first thing I should say should be nice place, he said, which is that little bit better than come here often, though the same thing. She smiled a sort of smile, whether of politeness or sympathy. They weren't having such a good time. Then I should say something like I never do this, you know, which by the way I don't. Not even a smile. Do you, which didn't sound as jokey as he intended it to be. The moustache with a waiter came over. I'm going to have a drink, she said, a laconic second sentence. Gin and tonic, please. Two. They buried their heads in the menu. *Have* you been here before ? Want to recommend anything ? Yes, but no, which was better: slightly humorous, a little sarcastic and familiar. Even the faintest bit flirtatious, which he felt he had a right to expect, given how they had got here.

You're not that confident in your own decisions then ? I like to see others make their own, she shot back, showing in fact that very confidence that he had begun to sense she didn't have. Wrong again, and maybe she wasn't desperate either. A drip of excitement formed in his mouth. The drinks came, they ordered, he lay back. She lay back too, drink in hand, suddenly at ease and all smiles, I have done this before. But just once. And I was you. It was in Paris, a bit of a cliché. I speak French. I was younger. He was much younger, a teenager. I had a hotel room. It was a genuine coincidence that we got off at the same stop. It was summer. I had no plans for the evening. His body literally shined. I smiled, he immediately started talking to me, sticking very close as intoxicated by the heat I brought him in with me. We sweated, we undressed, we had sex and it was terribly, terribly disappointing, over in 5 minutes. He lay there and suddenly I wanted to go to the Louvre, which I knew was open until ten that night, so I asked him to leave. I've been nearly married. We got engaged after three years and within weeks it just sort-of fizzled out. We see each other occasionally, spend the night. I'm a bit bored, but I've a nice place, nice job, nice holidays, nice niece. She shrugged, finished her drink, which she'd sipped to death, called the waiter over and ordered two more. Never been nearly married, said Ben. I don't recommend it, she replied, with a smile. They were five minutes in, and it was fun.

The meal was poor, but he successfully avoided pinning the blame on her, and they shared the joke, which a good bottle of wine made ever funnier. And they both went for big stodgy puddings and dessert wine, and then another because it was so nice. And they were both pretty drunk and pretty happy. They even avoided that moment of soberness as the bill comes and what comes next becomes a serious question. It wasn't. Without a question they split the bill and spilled out on to the street. May I, he said, putting his arm around her. Don't ask, she

replied, be purposeful and imposing. He kissed her and they had a rather wet embrace. OK, she said as they broke for air. I lied. I don't have a nice place. It's crap, but its close. Lead on, he said, and they kissed again. He wrapped himself around her as much as he could, and they staggered back. The front door led straight to a lounge with wooden floors, stylish furniture and minimal but tasteful art on pristine and smooth plastered walls. Not that he concentrated on the surroundings, as coats dropped to the floor and they both furiously pulled off their clothes until at the same moment they were both completely naked.

It was lazy, wonderful, thirtysomething sex. She had the presence of mind to keep the rug spotless. She took his hand and led him through to the bedroom. He pressed her close, sharing their warmth, wrapping himself around her again, this time completely and with nothing between them. They lay. Together. He smiled, kissed her on the mouth that was perfectly hanging just millimetres in front of his, snuggled up even closer and fell asleep.

They woke up at opposite ends of the big bed, but Ben sent his left hand on a little errand to find the rather flabby backside he'd caressed so thoughtfully the night before and it rested there lightly until she also woke up. She shuffled backwards along the bed until that flabby backside was flush against him, and they lay there serenely, looking at the early morning out the window, not having drawn the curtains the night before. She turned and looked him over. Coffee ? Breakfast ? She wasn't a 'sex in the morning, sex at night, sex in the afternoon's alright' girl then. But he was happy. Sure, he said, stretching, whatever. Well, a shower first, and then I make a mean omelette. She padded over to her en-suite, no attempt to cover herself up. She wasn't quite as honed as she'd been the night before. But she was cuddly and cute. Water finds its level.

Breakfast was in bed and naked again. She compromised her clean-smelling skin with his unwashed body. That was nice, intimate. The eggs were completely overdone and had no shape, but he was hungry and there was effort made for him and he ate that up and drank it down with posh coffee. He thought maybe they would make love, but it was day, and it was real, and she smiled as she crept out of her side of the bed and started gathering things to dress with. He liked this girl. Do you have plans for tonight, he asked. Yeah, she replied, I thought I might see you again. Works for me, said Ben. Same time, same place ? I'll wait for you on the platform. And so it ended - and continued.