

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Denmark Hill

by Ivor John

Peter had rushed from work to try to get to his appointment. So much so that he had left his coat on his desk. He no choice but to go back for it as his phone and his oyster card with his season ticket, were in the pocket. Most of the others were leaving as he went back in, each making pithy comment about why he was going back into the office. He grabbed his coat and checking his phone was in the pocket, pushed his way past his colleagues a group of whom were chatting as they left the office. Talking about their evening plans, games of badminton, Happy Valley on television. Rather than risk getting into conversation he walked quickly past the lift, deciding instead to take the stairs.

The company's office was modern, stylish. Designed to give clients who would visit to discuss their needs, or to receive briefings on their company accounts, the right, professional surroundings. The corridors, shared by other businesses, were elegantly carpeted, so too the lifts. But the staircase had bare concrete stairs, decorated only by a fire extinguisher on each landing. It was as if it revealed the charade of the rest of the building.

Not quite running, he took the steps two at a time, his heavy footsteps reverberating up the staircase. Once out of the building, he decided to go straight to Victoria, where trains to Denmark Hill ran every fifteen minutes. The late afternoon crowds of tourist and theatregoers slowed his progress along Victoria Street. He took a chance and cut of past the front of the Cathedral into Ashley Place where the crowds would be fewer.

As he passed the passport office, he could see there was a train on platform one. Running now, he slapped his wallet, containing his oyster card against the yellow pad. Irritated that the barrier didn't open, he ran through an open gate, holding his card up to a disinterested member of station staff who nodded at him. He pushed past a group of students to get onto the train. He hadn't checked the destination and was relieved when the recorded message announced stations to Dartford. The train was packed, with no chance of a seat, but it was only a ten minute journey. He managed to squeeze into a space by the door on the other side of the carriage, knowing he would be on the correct side when the train stopped at Denmark Hill.

Ten minutes to think about what he wanted to say to his counsellor. Or what he wanted said to him. It had been several days since his first appointment. He wasn't sure if he felt much different. For example, here he was now, in a packed railway carriage. But he may as well have been alone, in his flat. He found the people around him intimidating. He was worried they may try to talk to him, engage him in some sort of banal exchange of thought. Even worse, ask some question of him, something personal. He mitigated against this by engrossing himself in his mobile phone. 'Only ten minutes' he thought, ten minutes and he could get out at Denmark Hill where he could disappear into Ruskin Park, where even if there were people, he could keep his head down to avoid having to see them.

Then he felt it, the panic, growing up from his guts and radiating through his chest, and the shortness of breath. He knew they could see it, his discomfort and that soon, he would be gasping for air. He managed to catch his breath, and fight against gasping for air. He knew that it wasn't far and he could get out of the train. Fortunately the doors opened beside him, and he stumbled onto the platform.

Managing to suppress the urge to scream hysterically he half ran to the exit barrier. Stabbed at it with his oyster card, so that it slid back, allowing him through. He ran past Kings College Hospital, and into the park opposite. Now, out of the crowded train, Peter managed to compose himself. It was a few minutes walk across the park to Herne Hill Road, where he was heading for.

He was pleased that when he got to Corbett's the receptionist had gone and so he did not need to explain why he had requested an urgent appointment.

'Hi Peter, do come on in' Alan Corbett said loudly, his office door slightly open. 'Do come in, pull the door to, you know the routine by now. And thanks for the cheque by the way. Tell me what is happening for you that you want to see me so urgently. You're looking pretty flustered right now. Are you ok? There is water on

the table, take your time, no rush.'

Peter wasn't comfortable as he explained about the visitor to his office, demanding to see him. Living alone at the flat since she had moved out. Even taking 'her' cat. He hadn't seen her since that day. Hadn't even heard from her.

'Peter, you tried to tell me before, but it was too difficult for you. But it would be helpful perhaps if you could explain it to me. You see what happens some times, and what may be happening now, is a distorted version of what actually did happen. We readily believe that our recollection is accurate, but really it is a construction. You could say that you memory believes, before knowing remembers. This can set up an imbalance, a cognitive dissonance which could be amplifying your distress.'

'Peter, we do need to get to try to understand how what happened, is feeding how you are feeling,'

Memory believes before knowing remembers.