

SHORT STORY EXERCISE

This exercise was inspired by a painting by the American artist Edward Hopper (1882-1967) who is known for his brooding landscapes and interiors of ordinary life in the USA, His "The Automat" painted in 1927 shows the seated figure of a girl at night in an automat, an all-night unmanned cafeteria usually found at railway or bus stations in the States at that time and where you helped yourself from vending machines for refreshments. Who is she? Where is she going? Is she waiting for someone? Here are some of the group's answers!

THE AUTOMAT

The reason Edward Hopper took so long to complete this particular painting was only known to himself until, that is, he decided to put it into his latest exhibition. While he had to make Laura look different to those who knew him it was very clear.

Edward met Laura when she was on holiday. She had relatives in Chicago and decided to come over for 6 months. She was always an unsettled child always looking for something more in her life so the decision to come to America came as no surprise to her parents.

In the early 1920s work was hard to find even for someone as determined as Laura Forsyth. However, a friend of her Aunt Elizabeth owned a small shop selling artists' brushes, paints, frames and oils and offered the young enthusiastic Laura a position as an assistant. He had decided to reduce his hours since a mild heart attack had caused him to slow down.

Laura started on the Monday of the second week in April. She felt a little out of her depth to start with which was very unlike her but she soon familiarised herself with the stock and customers found her friendly and helpful.

It was in the July when she first met Edward. He seemed a very serious person as if he was scowling. She remembered this meeting and recalled later that she found him a challenge; here was someone who didn't fall for her charms the instant they met.

Edward handed Laura the items he had bought and she enquired whether or not he would like them delivered. His reply said it all: "I am quite capable of carrying these few items thank you I live round the corner." Despite his sharp reply he made her feel strangely unsettled. It must have been his greying hair and the way he dressed that disguised his age. Laura gave him his change with the parcel and watched him walk out of the shop knowing they would meet again. She was intrigued.

When Laura arrived at her Aunt's that evening after closing the shop and having to walk quite a distance to the train in the heavy snow her mind kept going back to the artist: why did he look so sad she wondered.

Edward thought about Laura from the moment he saw her which unsettled him; he had sworn never to trust anyone again after losing Josephine to an English tutor who himself came to America on a working holiday.

This was about to change if it hadn't already done so.

Over the next four months they saw each other a number of times; Edward pretending to need things he already had and Laura offering to send away for anything that wasn't available in the shop. The more they met the easier it became to communicate with each other and they even managed to go out on a few occasions.

Just as they were becoming more than a little at ease in each other's company a letter arrived from Laura's mother telling her that her father was very ill and she would have to return home as soon as possible. When she told Edward his heart sank: "How long do you think you will be gone?", he asked. "I'm not sure Edward. The shop will be closing anyway now that Mr Keller has gone. He has no family so I won't have any work. Anyway I will keep in touch and let you know as soon as I find out exactly what I am going to do."

"When do you leave?"

"I have booked a seat on the 6.30am train the day after tomorrow. It's all very quick but I have to get home."

Laura met Edward at the Automat two hours before the train was due. The weather was harsh for the time of year and passengers were advised to come early which made the Automat very busy for a time. Gradually trains arrived it only left Laura and Edward about 30 minutes until the train came for the first part of Laura's journey taking her away from Edward.

"I'm sorry Edward, can we say goodbye now please?" And as if she didn't have to say any more they hugged each other affectionately and Edward gave her a gentle kiss before walking through the doors of the now silent Automat leaving Laura reflecting: "Will I come back? why didn't I meet Edward somewhere else, another time?"

She felt very cold although the radiator was on. Her coffee was still a little warm and she was wrapped up but it wasn't the weather that made her feel chilled.

Until we meet again, she thought.

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