

FOUR  
DOORS

& OTHER STORIES

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M P Publishing Limited  
12 Strathallan Crescent  
Douglas  
Isle of Man  
IM2 4NR  
British Isles

ISBN: 978-1-84982-263-3

Book Design by Maria Clare Smith  
Cover Design by Alison Crellin

A CPI Catalogue for this title is available from the British Library

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*To Petra and Gabriel*



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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I must have been four year old when I first felt the touch of love. One of my colleagues at the kindergarten was making me feel butterflies in my stomach whenever my eyes met his. It was a hidden, unspoken feeling that made me wish to name my first-born son after him. In the meantime, I changed my mind. Of course, it was just infatuation and so it stayed for a long time, with other people, until I began to grasp the true meaning of love.

You know what they say: “Love makes the world go round.” When hearing this, most people would think of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Leonardo Di Caprio and Kate Winslet in *Titanic* or Ryan O’Neal and Ali MacGrow in *Love Story* to name just three of the most popular romantic stories. I, myself, had long believed that no matter what I did, no matter how successful I was or how many friends I had, only romantic love would fulfill my soul. Then came a moment when I had this revelation. I was watching this wonderful sunset, in Abadiania, Brazil, when I just knew that love is actually our true state of being. I began to see it everywhere, manifested in every single creation and creature on earth. I became aware that I was connected to the whole universe, everything and everyone in it. I realized that from that day on, I had to live my life consciously because every single thought, word, and gesture of mine had an impact. I also discovered that there is magnificence in every single human being—even in those who seem ugly (in both appearance and character).

*Four Doors & Other Stories* is a reflection of love. It was born on a cold December day in 2011, with “The Enchanted Sledge.” At first, it was this one short story, inspired by one of my favorite places in the Romanian Carpathians, the itch in my fingertips, the need to prove myself that I still could write fiction. Then, the idea of a collection of short stories about love, that would make people smile, feel good, show them how magnificent they are, and encourage them to live their dreams, occurred.

The twelve stories included in this book will show you that love—the kind of love I experienced as well—is all around. In a mother’s embrace, in an elephant’s trumpet-like squeak, in the sea waves caressing your feet, in the passionate glance of a long-forgotten lover, in a handkerchief left on a table, in a piano song and the apparent hatred between two women, in a mail carrier letter delivery. Just open your heart, have faith, and reach for it.

## FOUR DOORS

The living room had windows overlooking a quiet park. Patches of green, bright new grass grew along the winding alleys, made of fine, almost white gravel. Two kids were playing hide and seek in a pavilion with a bricked roof that stood near a small dried-up pond. She wondered when the boy, who was hovering around the place, would see the girl who hid inside, her back against one of the thick, wooden, beautifully carved pillars.

The squeak of the parquet floor startled her. This was an old building, with high ceilings that smelled ancient. It seemed familiar although she had crossed its threshold for the first time. The girl was working on her bachelor's degree thesis and her French literature teacher, who was supervising it, had invited her over. She was a short, stout woman, in her seventies. She had the hair cut like the Hollywood divas of the twenties, dyed in an artificial red.

"I brought you some of that homemade rose jam I've told you about," she said, putting a silver tray, adorned with geometrical patterns on the low table. "Also this water comes from a distant source that springs in the village where I was born, up in the mountains. Every week, a nephew of mine has things to attend in the city and refreshes my supply."

The teacher had no children. Her colleagues knew that she was married once, when she was younger, but her husband had died during the war. She kept a complete discretion about her private life and she had never been seen in public with a man, at least, not in romantic states.

This situation, her fellow teachers believed, made her severe and distant.

The girl was not afraid of her. On the contrary, she had chosen her as her mentor. She liked the woman's style and French accent, as well as the kindness she had in her eyes from time to time, when she was addressing her during classes.

"Thank you," the young woman said and poured some of the water into a glass. She would have continued but the ringing of a telephone erupted in the hallway.

"I'll be right back and we can start working," apologized the teacher.

She took advantage of this respite, to have a closer look around. Until then, the girl had been absorbed by the outer scenery. Sipping from her glass, she started walking around the room that had ceiling-high bookshelves, packed with tomes, against the walls. The water tasted pleasant, a bit sweet. With every drop, her perceptions seemed to widen. Her sight was more penetrating. She was realizing that ink smelled differently on each book. She could hear the ants walking under the wooden floor and the birds arguing on the window jamb. She was suddenly present in this room as well as in the other rooms of the apartment. She was standing right here, in front of a bookshelf, but she was also so close to her teacher, that she could see her holding the receiver a bit off from her right ear. She was walking in the hallway that opened up from the bedroom with a solid, matrimonial bed. It was a poorly lit hallway, with doors on both sides. The doors had big handles, made of yellow brass. The teacher kept speaking on the phone without seeming to notice her. The girl decided to try one of the doors, randomly.

To her surprise, it was suddenly dark. Beyond the open window, a window cut in an Arabian style, she could see the starlit sky. The moon was illuminating a valley and its low, whitish buildings. A mild, cooling wind moved the transparent drapes and made the candles in the table candlestick glimmer. Except for the red velvet

walls, the room was austere. The table and a high-backed armchair were the only pieces of furniture. The girl was about to leave the chamber—her host must have ended her conversation and start to wonder where she was—when the door slammed open, pushed by a ravishing beautiful young woman. Strangely, the newcomer didn't show any sign of seeing her. No matter how loud she would have screamed or how she would have thrown her arms around. Like they were separated by an invisible wall, transparent only on one side. The girl stopped and stared at the stranger. The woman was dressed in odalisque garments. The purple shalwars tightened around her ankles with broad turn-ups, embroidered with golden thread. Her chest was fretting in a tight corset set in jewels. She was wearing heavy bracelets at her wrists that made a nice jingling sound every time she moved. Her face was covered in a purple veil that she suddenly took off and let flow on the back of the chair. She reached the window and the moon threw sparkles in the tiara that was crowning her forehead and her dark, waist-long hair. She was not tall, but she was svelte, with wonderful proportions. She was resting her elbows on the jamb and looking into the distance, lost. From time to time, she would stop contemplating and turn around, to the door. She would stamp her foot, impatiently and bite her lips. After a while, she leaned so much outside the window that the girl thought the young woman might jump. Instead, she threw her arms to the sky, as a wordless imploring. As if she demanded an answer. A rooster's crowing rose far away. As if she had received it, the Arabian princess turned around and covered her face with the veil. She took a thin, silken, handkerchief from her corset. She made a knot and put it on the table. Then she left. A short time after, a man came. His face was hidden by a silk turban adorned with a peacock feather caught in an emerald stone. Noticing that nobody was in the room, he stopped on the threshold, confused. After a second, he started looking into every little corner, searching for something. He only stopped when he

caught sight of the handkerchief. He picked it up, having a hard time believing his eyes. He sniffed it while a deep, agonizing groan came out of his throat.

At this very moment, the images started mingling and here she was again, back in that dark hallway that had many doors. She felt a little scared and wanted to return to the living room. All the doors being identical, she had no idea which one to open next. So, she just chose one at random.

The sun was burning, mercilessly. The heat was unbearable, as were the smells that came in from the street. This place seemed familiar. The girl remembered the valley with low, whitish houses she had seen from the palace window. Now, she was inside one of those houses in the valley. A one-room, poor demure. The floor was made of dirt and square holes in the walls stood as windows. A cast-iron kettle was bubbling and smoking on the fire. A woman, who stood with her back to the girl and seemed to carry something in her arms, was looking at it from time to time. Because of the strong noises coming from outside, one could hardly hear her sweet but sad lullaby.

The door made of logs tied together with rope almost fell apart when a man pushed it heavily. The woman turned, in awe. The girl almost recognized her. Either it was her, the Arabian princess, or the resemblance was stunning. The little baby at her chest let go of the rosy nipple and started crying. She covered her breast with her white and coarse tunic and put the child into a shelter made of rags, that served as crib. If he wanted to hurt somebody, let him hurt her.

“Please, forgive me. The food is not ready yet. Our baby was bewitched by the evil eye and I had to take care of him. But I’m working on it, now. You’ll have your supper in a second.” She spoke in an unknown language that the girl was somehow able to understand nevertheless. The man jostled her violently and neared the kettle. Then he shook his head in discontent.

“Ever since I first laid my eyes on you, you were

worthless. You're lazy, you're unsubmitive and you gave me one son only. I'll look for another wife," he said kicking down the boiling pot. Then, he came close, as if ready to slap her. The young woman was standing with her head down, unable to look up at him. The man let his arm fall along his body, inert.

"From now on, I'll save even my blows for a woman worthier than you," he told her in disgust. "And this boy you gave birth to is for nothing. He is crying so much, he makes me think that he is as feeble as his mother. I'm sick of both of you," he spat as he left, slamming the door.

The mother held her baby. She could cry now as much as she felt like. He kept on saying these things over and over but he always came back. Only each time he was more callous, more cold. Nevertheless, she was in love with him. And she knew that deep down in his hard-hearted soul, he felt the same. How could she make him see it? How could she give him more children when every time she tried to get near him, he would push her away in anger, yelling she was a slut. Allah was her witness that her husband was the only man she had ever known. At night, he would sleep with his arms folded and his forehead frowned. It was one time only, after she gave birth to their son, that he showed her he still wanted her. Some Europeans, somehow lost in those lands, had once made him drink an enchanted beverage that turned him into a fire burning with passion and tenderness. He had confessed to her how much he loved her. How much pain he endured every time he said bad words or hit her. He had told her that he couldn't live without her. But the next morning, their life resumed the same as before, even harder. The young woman was living each day, hoping that those Europeans would return.

"I have to go back," the girl told herself. By some miracle, just like that, she was back in the hallway with many doors. Which one was the right one to her time? Maybe it was a good idea to mark those she had already opened. She discovered a lipstick in the back pocket of her trousers. And she put a tiny "X" next to the handle

of the door she was about to enter. "Who knows, maybe this is the right one," she thought.

She easily recognized the surroundings. She was in Paris. The pedestrians were wearing clothes that had become fashionable around the 1800s. She was enjoying the sight of men wearing hard tops, high collars and pants so tight on their legs, like a second skin, and of women in long, ample dresses and bonnets. Without expecting it, she kept pace with a young lady, almost her age, who had long, dark hair combed in a ponytail with a red bow. The Parisian seems to be a younger, fresher version of the same woman she met during the two other travels. She is walking joyfully, her face lit up with inward happiness. She holds carefully to her chest a small package wrapped in paper. The girl doesn't appear to belong to the nobility—if so, she probably would have had a carriage, but her clothing shows good wealth. After a while, she turned left to a side alley in Faubourg Saint Antoine, entered an interior courtyard and took a staircase that lead to the storey under the roof. Her knocking was determined. A young man, heavy with sleep, opened up. The sight of her put a large smile on his face, changing his composure at once. He invited her in. The room was small but cozy. It didn't have much furniture but it is filled with books and schooners in miniature. The bed is a little untidy. An open Stendhal's *The Red and The Black* lay on it as if he fell asleep reading.

"I finished it," she tells him happily while handing him the package.

"I'm so happy," he answered, taking her into his arms and spinning her around the room. "I've been waiting for this moment for so long!"

A manuscript appeared from under the paper cover. It was her manuscript, her first book, the result of several months of hard work. Everything was just perfect now, that she got accepted to Sorbonne's Faculte des Lettres. She would be free, she would have a new life and she would be able to travel all around France. All these, due to her best friend, who trusted her. Who encouraged

her whenever she felt down, whenever inspiration was fading away. She was different from the women of her age. Unlike them, she was going to marry for love.

"I would love to stay longer," she told him. "But I have to get back to college. I'll see you tonight, all right?" she promised. Left behind, the boy was kissing the manuscript pages. Unfortunately, the author forgot to come back. He waited for her in vain.

It was not until long, long years, had passed, when the cozy room became just a refuge where he could work at his schooners in miniature, that an important lady paid him a visit. At first, he didn't recognize her. Fashion had changed and so had she. She was calmer, quieter. She seemed happy although some kind of unfulfillment was dimming her bright and open smile.

"I came here to ask your forgiveness," she uttered before he could speak.

"I'm happy to see you again. There's nothing to apologize for, you have done nothing wrong..."

"Yes, I have. I've betrayed you, your trust. Because of me, your effort was in vain. I wanted to come and see you so many times but I was ashamed."

She told him her story. Ten years ago, that day, she had panicked the moment she had set foot outside. What if she had no talent actually? What if she ended up marrying for money, a chubby bourgeois? What if she was to live her whole life, in the same small house, on the same street? What if she was never to leave Paris? Fate or not, the same day she had met the Count. And she had married him shortly after. He was a handsome and good-hearted man, who loved her dearly. He had a chateau and a large estate somewhere, in the south, he had to attend to. Consequently, she had dropped her studies and become a provincial. Of course, she had stayed a passionate reader. He was buying her all the books she wanted but he had one request: give up writing and everybody who encouraged her to pursue such weird activities, unsuitable for a woman and a Countess. She had fulfilled his request, without much regret. What were

the odds of being successful in a man's territory, anyhow?

"Despite this, not a day had passed by without me thinking about you. Especially during the last years, when I felt that something was missing from my life," she ended her tale.

"I think that what is missing, is you...I believe you when you say your husband is a good man. But I'll take the risk and say he's not good for you if he doesn't allow you to be yourself."

"What can I do now?"

"It's never too late. You may start all over again. Start writing. See where it leads you."

"If I was to do this, I should leave him. And this is beyond my control. We love each other, we have a child together. Our life is smooth and settled. Moreover, I haven't written anything in ten years. It's been too long."

"If you don't believe in yourself, I cannot help you." His voice had turned bitter.

"I only wanted to see you. I have to go now. My little one is waiting for me, in the carriage."

The girl was waving her hands, in a desperate attempt to make the woman listen to the man. We're grown-ups so stupid? Couldn't they feel when they were unhappy and let go of their unhappiness? They both went down the already familiar staircase. The girl was back in the hallway. Two of them were marked with lipstick. There were only three left. She chose one, randomly.

"I'm back," she thought as soon as she recognized the alleys of the botanical garden, which she knew well. The sky was a bit cloudy and the trees had no leaves. Neither the heat nor the cold had any effect on her. She was wondering how she was going to explain to her teacher her sudden absence and return. She had to get to the house in the park as fast as possible. She was heading to the exit in quick steps, when a group of visitors made her stop in amazement. The men were wearing German military uniforms. The women were dressed as the forties dictated. This was too much. Had she become a prisoner of the hallway with doors? What if she couldn't go back

to her time?

The girl headed to the sun house, abashed. She looked at the tropical plants, trying to get her courage back. For the first time, she passed beyond the protective fences, climbed into the trees and caressed the leaves. She was as light and invisible as thought was. From the top of the highest tree, she saw a woman. Hence, she was not the only visitor. Curious, she came closer. And she cried with surprise. Of course, nobody heard her. Right there, in front of her eyes, in tears, holding a black-and-white picture and piece of torn paper in her hands, stood her teacher. A younger, more beautiful version. The paper said that her husband had been killed in battle. The photo pictured them together during the happiest day of her life: her wedding day.

“I shall never love another man, this much I promise you,” she was whispering while big teardrops were rolling down her cheeks. “I’ll carry on living, although I don’t feel like it, because I know you wouldn’t have it any other way. I’ll continue studying and dedicate my life to knowledge. So that one day, I may find out why you went away so soon my darling, darling!” Taking a good look at her, the girl noticed that her teacher bore a striking resemblance to the other three women, only this time her hair was shorter and lighter. Was it possible that she had travelled through the centuries, from the Orient to Europe, following the same person, like a detective? And being back to her country meant that she had reached the end? There was only one way to find out

She was back in the hallway with doors. Without taking out the lipstick in her pocket, she pushed a handle. She was back in the living room with ceiling-high bookshelves. The glass was half empty. She could hear the happy voice of the little boy outside, who had discovered the girl hidden against the pillar: “I found you, I found you!” The teacher ended her phone conversation and returned to the chamber, throwing her a knowing glance.

“Now, that you know all there is to know, let’s start our work!”