



Of all the matters that fussed in Peter's memory, the one that confused him most was the moment when he felt the pressure of Miss Lashari's hand on the small of his back. What was the meaning of the gesture? What had he done to deserve such intimacy? He had always admired her. In the tedious staff room debates about parking, or parents' evenings, she spoke with an intensity he found refreshing. Although she wore a headscarf, her politics seemed classically liberal, in stark contrast to the cornered and cowed conservatism of the Deputy Head, or the noisy socialism of the Head of Art. That morning, during break, he had been standing at the stationery cupboard, one hand on the open metal door, seeking a replacement whiteboard cleaner because the children - dare he apportion responsibility in this day and age? - had stolen the one in his classroom. Finding no such item held in stock, he closed the door with a rattle of keys and tested it to check it was secure.

"Peter, may I ask your advice?" she said, appearing at his elbow and standing so close he could see how carefully the orange dusting had been applied to her cheek.

He pressed his arms to his side. The children called him 'Stinky Pete' behind his back, or made laughing reference to *Toy Story* in his classes. It was an uncommonly warm day for October and her proximity made him self-conscious. "Of course, er, Sangita, how may I be of assistance?"

Being so much larger, he didn't turn to face her, but he did not wish to appear rude and so unlocked the stationery cupboard and pulled open the door.

"It's not equipment, Peter. It's a pupil, from my fourth year class; Gareth Wong. I wonder if we might be able to discuss his development?"

As she spoke, her hand pressed gently but definitely into the small of his back. It was not a caress, but it had the effect of steam rising up from his spine to purify his lungs and heart. It was a sensation he had never experienced; an energy that felt exciting and totally fresh. He studied her face. The mascara brought out the intense amber colour of her eyes.

"The thing is, Peter, the kids tease him because he supports United rather than City." Her



hand dropped from his back leaving a draughtiness that made him frown. "I was wondering if you had any ideas; I don't know, from literature, of men who stuck to their ideals..."

Her teeth shone against the colour of her skin and the bright pink of her tongue. Bangles jangled on one delicate wrist.

"There's always Odysseus," he mumbled. "He spent ten years proving himself true, after the Trojan wars."

How ridiculous did he sound? *The Odyssey*? Was he going to tell her Odysseus was, in effect, a sexual prisoner of the nymph Calypso? He should not appear didactic, but he desperately wanted her to replace the hand on his spine.

"Odysseus?" she said, lowering her chin. "That's Homer? Or Virgil?"

"Homer," he replied immediately, although it was obvious she knew the answer. "He was given trials by the gods and offered the chance to be immortal," he ventured. "But he chose to return to his wife and son."

A smile spread across her face as she blinked. "You know, that's just the thing! Thank you, Peter, that's so great."

She touched his forearm as she turned away. He realised he had not, during the entire conversation, let go of the cupboard door. He locked it, wondering where his next class was, and how he was going to remove the graffiti cock and balls drawn in permanent ink on his whiteboard.

What an interesting approach! How many others would think of such a plan? Or ask his advice? Give the boy a hero. *Teach him all you know, Mentor, my friend.*

If he'd had more time he could have come up with any number of stalwart role models for the myopic little chap. Not just from the classics, but the moderns as well, or even Shakespeare. As the bell went, he decided to put more thought to it. He would ask her if Odysseus had worked, or whether another option could be considered. Anything to be close to her again.

That night he lay awake while the cat nestled into the space beside his knees. He could still feel the way the fabric of his shirt graced the skin of his back, the flow of warmth inside him. Why had she not pressed harder? Why had she touched him at all?

The following day was a Thursday. The last lessons were given up to Physical Education, normally an opportunity for him to complete his marking and steal away to do his grocery shopping. Instead, he followed a gaggle of chattering girls along the painted breezeblock



corridor of the gymnasium to enter the sports hall through the double doors. At the far end, the boys occupied the cricket nets. The eldest of the Singh brothers was at the wicket, a small hanky covering his topknot. They needed no supervision where cricket was concerned. The girls played volleyball, the court surrounded with hoodies and school shoes. He climbed a short flight of stairs to shuffle along the row of viewing seats. On the front row, half way down the hall, young master Wong was earnestly writing in a jotter. Still dressed in school clothes, he was obviously avoiding both net practice and volleyball. Not a team player, Peter thought. Perhaps Odysseus was the best option after all.

The boy did not notice Peter watching him, but Miss Lashari did. She wore a short-sleeved squash shirt and white jeans that looked too tight to move in, even for one as slight as her. Her hair, bunched up behind her head, was covered by a brightly coloured scarf that danced as she moved round the court. She was about to serve.

“Miss! Miss!”

Why was she playing? She was refereeing at the same time; a whistle hung round her neck. With a flick of her eyes, she had the children scarping from one side of the court to the other.

“That’s good, Troya, keep it in play.”

The ball traversed the net four times, bounced, and tumbled into a pile of sports bags. A girl ran to collect it. Sangita saw him, and waved.

Had it been him waving, the children would have made noises. But since it was her, they did no such thing. He waved back, a polite but informal acknowledgement of her presence. Afterwards, he felt he had judged the gesture well. He watched the game for the remaining fifteen minutes of the class and waited while she instructed the children to tidy up.

“Suzannah, please put the balls in the box. Fareed, tie the nets back against the wall.”

After the last of the children had gone, the door hung open for a few seconds before closing with only a breath of sound. As he hoped, she skipped up the steps to stand next to him. She placed a hand on his forearm as she tugged off the heel of her plimsoll and refitted it with one finger inside the canvas. He studied the back of her hand: the faint suggestion of henna; pink nails.

“I didn’t know you played,” he said.

It was a silly thing to say. He didn’t know anything about her.

“I played for Nottingham, the University. I’m not very good really, but it inspires the girls to



see me play. They don't, you know, make up excuses."

Once, many years before, he'd been competent at judo and had made brown belt. But then life took the turn that led where it led.

"Undoubtedly."

What was undoubted? That he understood what it meant to inspire children? That he was, once, an athlete like herself? Or that girls claimed to have their periods in order to miss games?

Having fixed her footwear, she removed her hand from his arm. "I mentioned your suggestion to young Gareth. And do you know what he said?"

"No?" he replied.

"He said he drew courage from his father, how he was the first to open a takeaway restaurant in the town centre." She clasped her hands together. "Doesn't that say so much about these kids? Aren't they *amazing*?"

She gently touched his elbow again with wide, extended fingers.

"You've been so lovely. Thank you for coming down, but I have to go now."

"My pleasure..."

But with a jump down the steps, she had shouldered her sports bag and shoved open the fire door. It hung ajar just long enough for him to follow her retreating figure out of sight. What was he to do? He was annoyed that he should be so distracted by such an easy ploy as tactility. Or had she really meant he was lovely?

That Saturday he went into town to collect his spare jacket from the dry cleaners and buy the groceries he had failed to purchase on Thursday. His mother had run out of milk, causing no end of upset. As he carried a basket down the aisle of pasta sauces and pesto, he caught sight of her at the end, by the Asian foods section. She was behind one of the deep, family sized trolleys laden with comestibles. He hung back, afraid to try his luck too many times. She pulled out a large tin of ghee from the bottom shelf and read the label. A young man appeared from round the end of the aisle. He sported sunglasses and a close-cropped Bollywood beard. He placed two large cartons of milk in the cart and they exchanged words Peter could not hear.

In his basket were the basics he needed. He could manage without mango chutney for another week. *Calypso, I refuse you*, he told himself as he backed out of the aisle towards the tills. *Ithaca awaits*.

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