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Title: Among the Crusaders

After classes were over, I rushed towards the train station. I got the ticket to Plymouth, which wasn't expensive. I dashed to the platform because the train was to leave in five minutes. 'Excuse me sir, is this the train going to Plymouth?' I asked a man wearing a suit. He nodded with a smile.

On the train I phoned Kate and told her that I was on my way. I sat beside a girl who was reading a book about losing weight. She had a packet of doughnuts and a can of soft drink. I pulled out *The Catcher in the Rye* by Salinger and started reading, a habit I had picked up here. My English teacher back home suggested that I should read the book because it would give me an insight into American youth culture.

I really missed talking to Dr Saleem. He was an understanding person. I learned a lot from him. However, I couldn't understand the reason why he insisted on teaching us *Animal Farm*. Too bad, he was to leave the department. Every time I asked why, he would comment that there were things I'd know with time.

I believed he couldn't take it anymore; he was attacked furiously by other staff members who didn't appreciate his ways of teaching. 'He is corrupting the student's minds,' they would claim. I recalled a discussion that happened one day between Dr. Saleem and Ayed, a student with a long beard and thick rimless glasses who always sat in the front row in Dr. Saleem's classes. They disagreed on something related to communism and Ayed kept repeating: 'It is against the teachings of Islam!' Dr. Saleem settled the argument by glaring and telling him that he wanted to get on with class.

'Ali, they don't want to teach you anything here!' he would protest every time I went to meet him in his office hours.

'Ya Doctor, when in Rome do as the Romans do.' I would reply.

To tell the truth I couldn't blame him. The twelve years he spent in the States must have influenced his way of thinking. He didn't expect that everybody would object to his ideas, especially the ones related to women.

In one of his office hours, I told him of my intention of taking a language course abroad. He told me I was wasting my money. I just sat looking at him, my eyes blinked.

'Don't misunderstand me,' he said. 'Look at it from this angle. You'll be studying for eight weeks, right?'

I nodded quickly.

'Good,' he continued, 'It will take you at least a month to get used to the new environment. By the time you start to get along well you will find that you're supposed to leave. I think it isn't worth it. Unless you'll be staying no less than six months you won't be able to gain that much. Trust me, it is a waste of money. Yet if you want to consider it a recreational tour under the guise of studying, that is something else.'

He winked and smiled shrewdly.

'Tickets, please,' the train manager said in his sharp voice, interrupting my reading. I hadn't managed to finish reading the second paragraph of the first page. I gave him the ticket which he punched with an instrument he was holding. The girl beside me gave the man her ticket, stretching her hand in front of me. I noticed a small, white patch on her shoulder. It skipped out of my mind and I didn't know what it was called although I'd seen it on a TV commercial.

When the manager returned the ticket to the girl, she, accidentally, dropped the pack of doughnuts. I picked it up and gave it back to her. She smiled and thanked me; her smile exposed her yellow teeth which, then, explained the patch on the shoulder.

The girl got off at the next station and I sat in her warm seat. I wanted to sit beside the window. I stopped reading the book, I sat gazing from the window. I enjoyed observing nature. I think it is the only beauty left unspoiled nowadays. The tall trees, the green meadows and the sea. Allah's heavens on his earth. I wondered if I could stroll around the meadows one day.

The train reached Plymouth after about an hour and ten minutes. The station was crowded with people. I had to pass through the ticket machine. Being aware of what to do, I didn't make a fool of myself. I met Kate at the entrance. She was wearing a sleeveless white top and a short jeans skirt. I liked her legs, well-proportioned above the knees. We shook hands and off we went.

'How was the trip?'

'Nice, I didn't know that Plymouth was near.'

'Well, now that you know that you can come here whenever you have the time.'

Plymouth was bigger than Exeter. The buildings were modern compared to Exeter. The city centre was remarkable. We sat in a coffee shop and chatted for a while.

'So how are your studies?' I asked

'Not bad, what about yours?'

'Don't ask. I'm getting fed up with analysing data. Luckily, my supervisor is away for a couple of days which means getting some time off, hooray!'

'That sound good.'

'So how are your friends?'

'Oh, they're fine.'

'What about you?'

'What about me?'

We were interrupted by the waitress who brought our orders; iced mocha for Kate and a cappuccino for me. 'Did you manage to make any close friendships with any of your classmates?' she asked and her lips, covered with pale lipstick, gently sucked at the straw.

'I don't get you.'

She smiled at me and asked if I had managed to get a girlfriend or not. If it was Nizar I would have told him to fuck off.

'Not yet, I don't think girls would be interested in me.'

'Oh, don't say that. I'm sure you'll get a girl soon. You're a nice guy,' she said, patting my hand.

I tried to change the subject because stupid ideas started forming in my head. I asked about Plymouth and the reason it was more modern than Exeter. Kate informed me about World War II and that the city was bombed during that time. 'It was flattened,' she said with irritation. 'Nazi bastards!' I didn't understand the last part. However, I noticed she didn't ask me about her mum. She took me for a tour around the city centre, then we took the bus to the seaside.

The seaside was crowded with people. There were many cafés there. I liked the sculptures there, some of them signified times of war. Some of the sculptures had the names of soldiers inscribed on them. Interestingly, I read names like Ahmad. Muslim names. I pondered with myself for a while over that. 'How could one die for a country that isn't his?' I asked myself. I didn't bother to find an answer. The seaside wasn't like Exmouth. There weren't a lot of half-naked girls. Kate and I drank a couple of

fresh drinks and strolled back to her apartment. 'Next time come early and I'll take you to the aquarium,' she said as we walked again by the sculptures.

It took us around twenty minutes to get to her flat. It was a nice flat. There was another student sharing it with Kate. Kate's room was large. It had a built-in wardrobe, a dressing table, a double bed and a study desk. There was a mirror on the dressing table, there was also a nice collection of creams and perfumes. Kate sat on the leather chair beside the desk and I sat on the bed.

I liked the way she arranged her books and papers on the desk; books on the left side of the laptop and papers on the right. There were some photos of her, taken with some friends, stapled to a notice board on the wall. I also saw the photo we'd taken in Exmouth. She was smiling in her bathing suit. I, however, was standing looking at the photo. I was embarrassed because my hand was around Kate's waist, Bob told me to do so. I failed to fake a smile.

'Would you like anything to drink?' she asked before turning on the stereo.

'No thanks. But can I use the loo, please?'

'Of course you can!'

She went outside the room and came back with a small plastic jug. 'I know you prefer to wash with water,' she said winking at me.

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We went out for dinner after we watched TV in the small kitchen. On the way out, I was curious about a box that was left at the entrance of the flat.

'What's in it?'

'Oh, it's Bob's. He said he would pick it up later this week.'

'I thought you broke up.'

'We did but that doesn't mean we can't speak to each other.'

I just shrugged.

'Why did you break up?'

It seemed that Kate didn't want to answer my naïve question. She was shuffling the key in the keyhole. I didn't know what made me ask such a question. She smiled at me. 'It's a long story. I don't want to bother you with it.'

'Sorry about that. It isn't my business, please forgive me.'

'Ah, don't worry about it.'

We ate at an Indian restaurant. Kate had a cheese burger and I had chicken tikka with rice. We chatted as we ate.

'So when will the last train to Exeter leave?' Kate asked after swallowing a chunk of her burger.

'Well,' I said mixing the curry with the rice, 'There's one at twenty past nine and another one at twelve. I'll think I'll take the first.'

'Great! We've still got time to go to some places,' she said, taking another chunk.

I insisted on paying for the meal. Kate didn't like it. She was pressing to pay for her own meal. To avoid any misunderstanding I told her it was a cultural custom. Always blame it on the culture. 'In that case it's all right,' she accepted.

The weather was cool outside. The breeze tickled my face as I stepped out. Kate took me to a pub. It was modern compared to the ones in Exeter. The place was also a nightclub and restaurant. The building was constructed mostly out of glass. Because it was early the place wasn't stuffed with people. The place had an upper floor, where people danced. However, according to Kate, there were two DJs playing different

types of music on each floor. People in the pub were drinking and gossiping. Some sat around tables, while others were standing in groups, swaying with the music.

I followed Kate, who manoeuvred her way to the bar. People were queuing, the beautiful bartenders served the orders with skilled swiftness. Everything was neat, except for the smell of the vomit that seemed to have been swept up a while ago. The floor was wet and sticky. The smell annoyed me, but the people queuing seemed not to bother, maybe because they were too drunk to notice it.

'What will you have? A coke as usual?' Kate asked raising her voice.

'No, I'll think I'll have a bottle of Corona.'

'When did you start drinking?' she asked smiling.

'Three weeks ago,' I replied.

I fumbled in my pockets to pay for the drink but Kate said she was going to pay. I told her that I drank it with lime. We sat and talked about my adventurous step into the drinking world. I had already prepared an excuse. I told her that I was looking for an experience. 'Well, don't go too far with it,' she said, gulping from her glass of gin.

Kate flicked her fingers to the music while I tapped my feet. A group of girls started dancing. Then some men joined them. One of the girls was slim. She was wearing a short, white mini skirt and a red top. She was the target of the men's attention. I sat observing her as I drank my second bottle.

'Do you think she's hot?'

'No,' I answered, turning quickly to Kate.

'Why?!'

'She is thin.'

'But men like slim girls.'

'Well, where I come from a curvy girl is a nice catch.'

'I'm glad to hear that, it sounds encouraging. I shouldn't worry about losing weight then.'

We exchanged smiles.

'So do you hang out at clubs with your friends?'

'Yeah, we go to Timepiece a lot.'

'Not bad, do you like dancing?'

I smiled embarrassed and told her that I didn't know how to dance.

'What? You're in England and you haven't started dancing yet?'

I sat quietly.

'You should try,'

'I did, but I think I look silly.'

'Bullshit. Anyone can dance, it needs a little practice.'

'I know but my body is... it's ...' I lost the word I was trying to say.

'You mean stiff?'

'Yes,'

'That's because you don't dance.'

The DJ put on a song by Shakira. Kate pulled me to the dance floor. Her body moved swiftly as she danced. I stood looking at her. She told me to move my feet. I tried to force them, but they were chained together. I remembered Saud's words when I first started dancing. 'You look pathetic,' he commented to me in the postgraduate centre. I didn't dance after that.

Kate held my hands and moved me around. She told me to follow her lead. Salsa they called it. I stepped on her feet several times, and she laughed when I did so. Another song started. The lyrics went *I wanna dance with somebody*.



Kate's moves became slow. She was looking more sexy. Her eyes were drowsy. She stepped close to me. I continued to look at her, hypnotised by her eyes. I stepped close to her. I raised my hand towards her waist but stopped. She, noticing that, smiled at me and took my hands and placed them around her waist. She, then, wrapped her hands around my neck. I felt my heart thumping rapidly. A shiver went through my spine. Sweat was forming on my skin. Her chest brushed against mine. I was finally dancing, but not with any girl, it was with Kate. I wanted to lean and kiss her lips, but the song ended.

We went back to the table. She said I was okay for a beginner. I apologised for stamping on her feet. 'It always happens at the beginning,' she said. Actually, we were yelling at each other because of the music. I glanced at my watch and noticed that the train was going to leave in five minutes.

'I'm going to miss the train,' I yelled, pointing to my watch.

'You can't make it, it's too late. The station is ten minutes walk from here and your bag is in the flat. Take the other one,' she yelled.

We drank again, I had four bottles. R&B music was put on. People trooped to the dance floor. Kate and I followed. I danced energetically. I didn't know why. Could it be the drink, or because there was no Saud to make fun of me? I danced with Kate who became wild and more sexy. We nodded our heads and shook our bums. But I still felt nervous every time she got close to me. She turned, her back towards me. I danced close to her. My heart started thumping again, sweat forming; our bodies merged again. My hands were on her waist. However, as her body brushed against mine I felt an erection. I immediately pulled away from her. I pointed to my watch, pointing out that it was time to go.

'Okay. Wait, I want to go to the ladies' room,' she said. Her lips wetted my ear.

We left at a quarter to twelve. I told Kate she should stay and that I could take a taxi but she insisted on accompanying me to the station. We hurried to the station.

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At the train station Kate bid me farewell. I was going to shake her hand, but she embraced me and planted a kiss on my cheek. I just patted her back. 'Text me when you reach Exeter, okay,' Kate said, waving at me as I rushed to the train that was going to leave in ten minutes. It was rather quiet. There weren't many people on the platform. I asked one of the staff if it was the train that was heading to Exeter. He affirmed this with a smile. 'You can get on at the rear,' he said. I looked at him. He then pointed to the back of the train, towards which I hurried.

The compartment I sat in seemed quiet. There weren't many passengers. There was a man with trimmed hair, sleeping. A middle aged woman with ruffled grey hair sat in front of me. A group of teenagers, three boys and a girl were at the back. I noticed a couple of suitcases left on the seats on the row beside me. Probably they belonged to someone who was using the toilet, I thought. But I spotted two bodies tucked in sleeping bags. Low class people, I supposed. A girl with dark, blue jeans and a black pullover came after me. She sat at the front.

After a while the train manager came to check the tickets. He approached the girl first. She didn't have a ticket and told him that she would like to buy one. She bought it following the same polite procedures the English take. The thank you- cheers thing.

I checked my pocket for my ticket. The manager approached the sleeping man. I could clearly see the features of the manager. He was a chubby fellow, reddish cheeks. He wore a turquoise suit. He gently spoke to the man.

'Tickets please.'

But the sleeping man didn't respond.

'Tickets please,' the manager repeated in his squeaking voice.

Again there was no response. The manager gently knocked with his metal keys on the wooden table that was in front of the sleeping man. He knocked twice. But the man was still sound asleep. The manager's eyes widened and he knocked hard on the table and said in an irritated voice: 'Tickets please!'

The man, I thought, must have come from a far place which would explain his deep sleep. After several attempts, the man finally woke up. The manager asked him for the tickets. But the man didn't have one. When he was asked if he wanted to buy one it turned out that he didn't have any money. The manager, who was holding to his patience told him that he, the man, 'was off the train.' But the man sat in his seat. 'You're off,' repeated the manager, stiffening up. The man stood, rambling some words. He was tall. Yet, he was staggering. Drunk? Or maybe on drugs? He got his guitar from the upper storage rack. But he dropped it. It made him enraged.

'You fucking bastard! You'll fucking pay for it!' the man insulted the manager, who was standing in the area between the two compartments.

The man then attacked the manager with the guitar. The manager, alert, shut the glass door avoiding the hit. But the man didn't give up. It seemed that he held a grudge against the manager. He attacked him again. The guitar got caught in the door. The manager hit the door, breaking the guitar's handle. The man became more furious and attacked the manager. The two of them clasped each other and staggered their way, swaying, to the second compartment.

All of that happened and nobody thought of giving the poor manager a hand. The lady in front of me was looking in all directions. She paced forwards and backwards. She asked in a trembling voice how she could get help. I didn't know the way they do

that here. She felt, with panic, beside her seat till she finally pulled a handle above her seat. The girl with the dark jeans rushed out of the train, calling for help.

Seconds later, two members of staff came. They pinned the man down.

A woman was shouting at the man: 'Do you want me to use this on you?' Maybe she was threatening him with using one of those electric sticks used on criminals.

'He started it, he started it.' The man wept like a child.

All that fuss and the teenagers at the back were asking who caught who, as if it were a school fight.

While the fight was taking place the two sleeping bags started to move. Like cocoons they were opened to reveal two lovely girls. One was blond and the other had brownish hair. I guessed from the language they spoke that they were from Eastern Europe. Cheap labour, I said to myself.

A drunkard, unemployed and with the government paying for his expenses, was causing trouble. He was trying to snatch a free lift on a train. While, on the other hand, two hard working girls sleeping on the floor had to pay. They might be delayed for an important flight because of his act, a citizen of a civilised nation. The irony of fate.

A man in a suit, with combed grey hair, came up onto the train. He apologetically informed us that the train would be delayed. I phoned Liz and told her that I would come home late. 'Oh dear!' was her reply when I told her about the incident. I also phoned Kate.

'Are you all right?' she asked worriedly.

'I'm fine, no need to panic.'

'Do you want me to come to the station?'

'That's kind of you, but really there is no need for that.'

'You can spend the night here and leave in the morning.'

Sleeping in Kate's room. I never thought of that. Spending the night with the woman I was dancing and drinking with.

'Thanks Kate, I really don't want to bother you. They said it's only a twenty minute delay,' and I ended the call.

While waiting for the other manager to arrive, I listened to the other passengers. The two girls beside me were explaining to each other what they could make out from what had happened. The blonde girl did most of the talking. 'Tick, tick,' she said knocking on the table. The teenagers at the back seemed careless of what had happened. Instead, they were talking about Hannibal and some Dr. Satan. They exchanged positive comments about what they were saying. The girl said loudly that she admired a scene with a chainsaw. I wished I knew what the hell they were talking about.

Another member of staff came and apologised again for the delay and informed us that another train manager was on the way and that the train would be moving within twenty five minutes. He also mentioned that the police were on their way. One of the teenagers, out of warm concern, kindly asked about the assaulted manager's condition.

'He had a slight injury to the head,' the man said, 'but he is still breathing and on his way to the hospital.'

The police came and checked where the man was sitting. I saw them put a couple of things into plastic bags. They asked the two ladies, who were sitting close to where the drunkard sat, and it was over. What interested me was that they had carried out their work smiling. Also, I found the lady officer attractive, her blonde hair and erect back.

It was a while before the train was on the move to Exeter. I sat in my seat observing the darkness of the night. Nobody asked about the tickets after that. I pulled my notebook from the bag and jotted the following thoughts:

*Unemployment+ alcohol + free money = trouble*

*Hunger + poverty+ frustration= cheap labour*

Then I let my thoughts take me adrift. I thought of Kate, the way she danced with me, her smiles, and most of all her kiss perfumed with the smell of gin.