

The Slap by Christos Tsiolkas

HECTOR

His eyes still shut, a dream dissolving and already impossible to recall, Hector's hand sluggishly reached across the bed. Good. Aish was up. He let out a victorious fart, burying his face deep into the pillow to escape the clammy methane stink. I don't want to sleep in a boy's locker room, Aisha would always complain on the rare, inadvertent moments when he forgot himself in front of her. Through the years he had learned to rein his body in, to allow himself to only let go in solitude; farting and pissing in the shower, burping alone in the car, not washing or brushing his teeth all weekend when she was away at conferences. It was not that his wife was a prude, she just seemed to barely tolerate the smells and expressions of the male body. He himself would have no problem falling asleep in a girl's locker room, surround by the moist, heady fragrance of sweet young cunt. Afloat, still half-entrapped in sleep's tender clutch, he twisted onto his back and shifted the sheet off his body. Sweet young cunt. He'd spoken out loud.

Connie.

At the thought of her, sleep surrendered its grip on him. Aish would think him a pervert if she had overheard him. But he was definitely not that. He simply loved women. Young, old, those just starting to blossom and those beginning to fade. And sheepishly, almost embarrassed at his own vanity, he knew that women loved him. Women *loved* him.

Get up, Hector, he said to himself. Time for the routine.

The routine was a series of exercise that he executed without fail every morning. At most, it never lasted more than twenty minutes. Occasionally, if he woke with a headache or hangover, or with a combination of both, or simply with an ennui that seemed to issue from deep within what he could only assume to be his soul, he managed to complete it all in under ten minutes. It was not strict adherence to the routine that mattered but simply ensuring its completion—even when he was sick, he would force himself to do it. He would rise, grab a pair of track-pants, throw on the T-shirt he'd worn the previous day and then perform a series of nine stretches, each of which he would hold to a count of thirty. Then he would lie on the rug in the bedroom and perform one hundred and fifty sit-ups, and fifty push-ups. He'd finish with a final set of three stretches. Then he'd go to the kitchen and switch on the coffee percolator before walking to the milk bar at the end of the street to buy the newspaper and a packet of cigarettes. Back home, he would pour himself a coffee, walk out on the back verandah, light a smoke, turn to the sports pages, and begin to read. In that moment, with the newspaper spread before him, the whiff of bitter coffee in his nostrils, the first hit of sharp tobacco smoke, whatever the miseries, petty bullshits, stresses and anxieties of the day before or the day ahead, none of it mattered. In that moment, if only in that moment, he was happy.

Hector had discovered from childhood that the only way to challenge the inert, suffocating joy of sleep was to barrel right through it, to force open his eyes and jump straight out of the bed. But for once, he lay back on his pillow and allowed the sounds of his family to gently bring him to complete wakefulness. Aisha had the kitchen stereo turned to an FM classical music station, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was flooding the house. From the lounge room, he could hear the electronic squeaks and tinny reverb

of a computer game. He lay still for a moment, then threw back the sheet and looked down at his naked body. He raised his right foot and watched it crash back on the bed. Today's the day, Hector, he told himself, today's the day. He leapt out of bed and put on a pair of red Y-fronts, pulled a singlet over his head, took a long, loud piss in the ensuite, and stormed into the kitchen. Aisha was breaking eggs over a frying pan and he kissed her neck. The kitchen smelt of coffee. He switched off the radio in mid-crescendo.

“Hey, I was listening to that.”

Hector flicked through the nest of CDs stacked clumsily next to the CD player. He pulled a disc out of its case and put it into the machine. He pushed through the numbers till he found the track he wanted, then smiled as the first confident notes of Louis Armstrong's trumpet began to sound. He kissed his wife's neck again.

“It's got to be Satchmo today,” he whispered to her. “It's got to be ‘West End Blues.’”

He performed his exercises slowly, counting up to thirty in slow, measured breaths. Between each set he swayed to the slow-building sensual progression of jazz music. He made sure that with every sit-up he felt the tightening of the muscles in his belly, and with every push-up, he was conscious of the pull of the muscles on his triceps and pecs. He wanted to be alert to his body today. He wanted to know that it was alive, strong and prepared.

On finishing, he wiped the sweat from his brow, picked his shirt off the floor where he had flung it the night before, and slipped his feet into his sandals.

“Want anything from the shop?”

Aisha laughed at him. “You look like a bum.”

She would never leave the house without make-up or proper clothes on. Not that she used much make-up; she had no need to—it was one of the things that very early on attracted him to her. He had never been fond of girls who wore thickly applied foundation, powder and lipstick. He thought it was sluttish, and even though he was aware of the ridiculous conservatism of his response, he could not bring himself to admire a heavily painted woman, no matter how objectively beautiful she might be. Aisha didn't need the assistance of make-up. Her dark skin was supple, unblemished, and her large, deep-set, obliquely sloping eyes shone in her long, lean, sculptured face.

Hector looked down at his slippers, and smile. “So can this bum get you anything from the shop?”

She shook her head. “Nah. But you're going to the markets this morning, aren't you?”

“I said I would, didn't I?”

She glanced up at the kitchen clock. “You better hurry.”

He said nothing to her, irritated by her comment. He didn't want to hurry this morning. He wanted to take it slow and easy.

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