Sticks & Stones

Kathleen M. Steele

‘Bloody Johnny-come-latelies! Telling me how to do my job!’ Ralph shook the letter at Miriam. She kept her eyes on her coffee cup, blowing softly into the steam.

Ralph started. She knew he would. His words rushed together as he shifted up a gear. ‘I was in the army in Baghdad before that little bastard was swimming in his dad’s bag! I won’t take crap from him!’

Miriam held her coffee in her mouth until it cooled. She’d read once about a monk who carried a stone in his mouth for three years to master the power of silence.

Ralph glared at her. ‘Can you believe the nerve of it?’

She glanced away from the spittle on his lips and kept her own firmly closed. Before she had discovered that her words were not worth the same as Ralph’s she used to let go sometimes, used to really let him have it. But she always missed the mark. After he had left for work, she’d find the words he refused to acknowledge scattered amongst the crumbs on the table, or strewn carelessly across the floors. And when she came across whole sentences in the daytime silence of the house, she would turn over what she had really meant to say until it dazzled. But, by the time Ralph returned, her words had lost their brilliance. He’d stare blindly at his lamb and three veg, and fork food into his mouth with a pained expression, as if her misshapen ideas had tainted the mint dressing.

Ralph jabbed a finger at the letter. ‘Official warning it says! Apparently some of the pooftas at the plant don’t like the way I speak.’ His face turned a deeper shade of red. ‘Don’t like the way I speak? Where’s the harm in a few bloody words, I ask you?’

Miriam lifted her cup again, slowly, with two hands. She could show that monk a thing or two. She’d been holding her stone of silence for over twenty years. Lately, it felt like it might slip from her mouth without her noticing. The thought made her smile.

‘What are you grinning at, woman?’ Ralph jumped up. ‘You never bloody listen! You never bloody think! That’s why you’ve got nothing to say!’ He leant on his fists, the table creaking beneath his weight. ‘Not that anything you said would ever make a blind bit of difference anyway.’

‘Oh, drop dead.’

Ralph snorted. He pointed a shaking finger at Miriam and said, ‘Ack!’ before slumping into his chair.

She stared at him and reached for his unmoving hand, giving it a small questioning tug. She dropped the dead weight of his hand, pressed her own to her mouth and looked around the kitchen as if the silence might suggest a solution.

She leant back and drained the last of her coffee, holding it in her mouth until it cooled, and allowed herself a guilty moment of celebration.

After all of these years, Ralph had finally paid attention.

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