

## Taking Stock - *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Tiffany Butler was on her lunch break. She was late and hurrying back to Furniture Land where she had worked for only two weeks. She didn't want to give the wrong impression. She was only 16 and she needed this job. As she approached the large display window of the shop where then new black leather suite was displayed, she saw that a man, of West Indian origin, old, was sitting in the window display. She thought he may have been trying out the top of the range black leather suite with white leather trim and though he looked a little odd in the window, she rushed into the staff room to put her coat away and don her shop blazer.

A couple of minutes later Tiffany was back on the shop floor and no one seemed to have noticed her absence. She ambled around the floor, asking customers if everything was alright. They would jump, then smile and say they were just looking. She walked on, enjoying her authority and glad to be doing her job well. Always keep the customer's needs in sight, Mr McLaine, department manger, said.

It must have been almost twenty minutes later when she happened to stroll past the window display again. And there, sat on the deep seated, plush leather three-seater, was the old West Indian man. Tiffany was disconcerted to see him still there. Had he fallen asleep? It didn't make the shop look very classy. She looked around for a senior member of staff but saw that they were all at the opposite end of the floor dealing with customers. Use your initiative, she thought to herself. You are a member of staff here, deal with the problem intelligently.

She looked at the man. He must have been in his fifties she thought. He was wearing a suit and tie, well used, so he wasn't a tramp or a drunk. And he wore a brown trilby which was not something you saw very often. She noticed his fingernails were very clean and she flexed her own acrylic fake glue on nails in appreciation of his good standard of hand hygiene. 'Scuse me?' she almost whispered, afraid that she might cause offence. The man did not move. 'Scuse me!' she said louder, trying to be more confident. He stirred a little. 'I wondered if you'd fallen asleep or something. Perhaps you're interested in buying our black leather plush suite with stylish white leather trim? It's extremely comfortable as I'm sure you've noticed. Sort of holds you like a big hand and moulds to your contours. I'd be happy to help you with the sale or to answer any questions you might have.' She waited.

The man was stirring, rocking himself into consciousness it looked like. He turned very slowly to look at her. The trilby obscured his eyes but she knew he was taking her in. She lost confidence. 'It's just you've been sat in the display window for almost half and hour now and I wondered it you might have fallen asleep or something. Or if you don't feel well?'

The man removed the hat from his head in a polite way and held it in his hands. He did not move from the sofa as he spoke. 'I am not ill thank you very much for asking,' he said, 'but no, I do not feel well at all.'

Tiffany couldn't make out the meaning of this conundrum. 'I'm sorry,' she offered, 'but I don't think I follow your meaning exactly.'

'Where are you from?' he asked.

'Peckham,' she said.

'I'm from Jamaica, long time past.'

'Right,' she said, unsure of what to say really.

‘Jamaica’s a land of great beauty did you know that?’ he asked.

‘I always thought that was where they film the Bounty advert, but I didn’t know for sure,’ she offered.

‘I think it might be,’ he said nodding sadly. ‘How old are you?’ he asked, ‘if that is not too impertinent a question to ask a young lady?’

He was so old fashioned, gallant she thought. ‘Sixteen’, she answered without hesitation.

‘Sweeeeet sixteen,’ he crooned. ‘When I was sixteen I ran along the beaches of Negril and swam like a fish in the sea. Seven miles of white sand beach and water as warm as your heart,’ he said.

He chuckled to himself lightly and she longed to ask what he was remembering but did not want to intrude on his private thoughts.

‘Peckham’s got a bit of green but it can be warm in a different way, if you know it,’ she said.

‘A philosopher!’ he said. ‘Are you a bit of a philosopher?’

‘I don’t think so,’ she answered, ‘but I think for myself.’

‘Good, good. That’s all we have in the end,’ he said, tapping the side of his head. ‘Make your choices wisely young woman and you will regret nothing.’

He said nothing for a few minutes and Tiffany was starting to feel conspicuous standing by the door, at the window display, talking to this strange man. ‘Would you like to buy that suite? There’s a discount this month and no interest credit for three years, if you’d like it,’ she said. He stroked the plump leather beside him in a lost sort of way. ‘Why are you so sad?’ she asked without thinking. He looked sharply at her and she realised she’d overstepped the mark. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Being nosy.’

‘It is very pleasing to be asked to share one’s state of mind. To be given an observation on one’s emotional state by a stranger confirms that we can all speak to each other if we really want to. I would like to answer your question, if you have the time?’

Tiffany was intrigued. She looked back at the floor and saw that her colleagues were still busy, so she stepped up into the window display and sat opposite the old man on the matching leather chair. It squeaked as she eased herself down.

‘I came here from the beautiful island of Jamaica in 1965. Of course I didn’t think it beautiful then or I would never have left it. That is an old man’s romanticism for what could have been. I met a glorious woman called Yvonne while working on the buses in central London. She was from Barbados and carried the strength of the sun in her arms. We had two sons. We were not well off at all and we would dream of our fantasy home with a real fireplace and a broad, expensive, deep leather sofa. All the luxuries of life. But disappointments lead a man to make choices that are not always good for his family.’ He regarded this young woman before him and years of his life flashed through his mind like a video fast-forwarding to the correct point. He saw his endless job applications as a master carpenter rejected within days. He was never to build wardrobes, design sideboards, shape tables, carve dining chairs ever again. A passionate talent wasted by lack of opportunity. It became an all-consuming frustration because of his second class citizenship in this foreign land. He’d been called Blackie on the buses and after the first couple of fights and the possibility of redundancy, he’d allowed it, acknowledged it. Given in. He said none of this to Tiffany. This was history he thought, why spread it’s shadow across today.

‘I drank,’ he said. ‘I drank a lot. All the money we had I would drink because it made me feel better about myself. The more I drank the less sober I was and I could hide away from disappointing myself. I never once struck my boys or my wife but I didn’t need to. I betrayed them in every other way. She threw me out after trying to cope with my immaturity after fifteen long years. She put her time in. She tried hard, I see that now. I sobered up. I drank again. It’s been a lonely road. Now I am almost sixty but I’m sober. And today my eldest son got married to

the most lovely Welsh woman with a lilting voice and a sunshine smile. And I saw my wife after, oh I don't know, three years, and she broke my heart with how beautiful and strong she is. We were able to talk and be dignified. It was a milestone. We talked of our foolish dreams of a house and a real fire and a broad, expensive, deep leather sofa. Then she went home with all her friends and I was going home when I saw this in your window. It is a beautiful thing.'

'Will you buy it for her?' asked Tiffany hopefully. 'It's very good value'.

He sighed a heavy sigh. 'No, I don't have the money any more and she wouldn't accept it after all this time. Bad choices. But I wanted to sit here and imagine what it could have been. If I had chosen differently.' He eased himself off the chair and stepped down out of the window display. Tiffany followed behind him. He put his hat on his head and tipped it slightly to her as he walked out the door. 'Thank you for listening to an old man's regrets young lady. I wish you great joy and good choices and a broad, expensive, deep leather sofa of your own.'

He was gone. Tiffany turned back to the display. She stepped up into the window and sat for a few moments where the man had sat, contemplating her philosophies.