

## **Stuck on a Pedestal** by *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Suktara Chatterjee, Suki to her friends, was not having a good day. She had been late for school because her mum had given her earache about the party she went to last night. ‘Who d’you think you are? Gallivanting round town all night – partying, drinking for all we know. You are 15 years old Suki, when we were your age, we didn’t have any freedom. You’re lucky we’re so liberal. Most Indian parents don’t let their daughter out of their sight! Anything could’ve happened.’ Blah, blah, blah thought Suki rolling her eyes as her mum had hysterics. She was fed up of hearing about India and how lucky she was supposed to be. What was the big deal? Parents!

The day continued in the same vein – badly. Suki ran into school, bombed up the stairs into registration, ten minutes late. She got another earful but this time from Mrs Carpenter – ‘the importance of education, the need for discipline, important choices, being an adult, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah’. It felt to Suki as if god was having a really big laugh at her expense.

Her first lesson was History. ‘Oh no!’ thought Suki, and they were going on a field trip to the National Portrait Gallery for the whole morning. History for three hours! How boring! Suki yawned as she got into the school bus with her fellow classmates not realising that Mr White was next to her.

‘Late night Suuktara?’ asked Mr White sharply.

‘No sir,’ she replied too innocently.

‘I want someone to tell us what they’ve learned about the Victorians during our visit. So we’ll give you the honour shall we Suuktara?’

Suki groaned.

They filed off the bus outside the gallery. Chloe Stephens, who Suki had nicknamed Snooty because of her big snout and her superiority complex, stopped next to Suki.

‘My, my, Chatterbox, sorry, Chatterjee, how you gonna chatter your little way out of this big hole?’ she laughed a smug, silly laugh and strode off.

Suki hated Snooty Stephens, she had called her names since primary school and had told tales on her on several unfortunate occasions.

Suki sloped into the enormous white building with everyone else. Mr White had arranged a tour guide, an ancient man with glasses and a stoop who droned on about dull old historical figures as if he were a recording. Suki looked around and saw that Mr White was deeply absorbed in the tour. This was her chance. She saw an arch to her left that spelled freedom. Without a second thought, she slipped through it and walked away as fast as she could.

Once she was a safe enough distance away, she stopped and considered her options. She could go home but her Mum would be there and that would mean grief. She could sit in the café but she didn’t have much money and these places always cost a fortune. She could bunk off but there would be questions. So she decided to wander round the gallery herself and rejoin her group at the end of their trip saying that she’d got lost. That would get her out of having to talk about the Victorians too. Brilliant!

She wandered through several rooms full of masterpiece paintings that she couldn’t be bothered to look at really. And then by chance, she found herself in a room of sculpture. Life size bodies in white marble placed at random, it seemed, all round the

room. In the centre of the room were pedestals with marble busts of men perched on them. It stopped her in her tracks. She'd never seen anything like it before. They were so life like. She looked up at the first statue and saw two intense eyes, a furrowed brow and a serious moustache seemingly dangling but actually carved in white marble. She furrowed her own brow and stared right back at him, trying to copy the expression on the statue's face and felt important and extremely superior. It made her giggle. Suki made her way slowly round the room, enjoying the sensation of being amongst so many pompous yet silent men. She weaved her way in and out of the statues examining the detail of the marble, how beautifully it seemed to fall in folds but was so hard and cold to the touch. It was amazing.

She paused in front of one of the busts. Something about it drew her immediately. It was the only statue of a black man, 'Ira Aldridge, the nero tragedian,' it said on the plaque. 'An actor,' thought Suki. She read the brief explanation that described his career, as the only black man of his time, playing Shakespeare in London.

'Interesting isn't it?' said a voice behind her.

Suki turned fearing that she'd been caught out by one of the guards who knew she'd given her school the slip. But instead she saw an old man, black, with a full head of bright white hair. She wondered if he had actually spoken or if she'd imagined it.

'Yes young lady I am talking to you. I said interesting isn't it?'

'Yes,' replied Suki, 'I like it very much.'

'You are looking at one of the most famous actors of all time, Mr Ira Aldridge.'

'I've never heard of him,' replied Suki.

'Of course not,' he said, 'there are many people who you will never hear about but does that negate their achievements? Ira Aldridge received fantastic reviews for his performances around the world at a time when, in America, he would have been a slave. Now that is an enormous achievement, for humanity and the arts.'

Suki didn't know what to say. She had no idea about Mr Aldridge and her knowledge of slavery was extremely limited. She suddenly wished that she'd paid more attention to Mr White's classes. She wanted to know more.

'Here's a pamphlet about him. You should read it.' He handed her a well thumbed booklet and continued to speak, 'Over here is an interesting piece,' said the man and she followed him to another statue a short distance away. 'This is Henry Gibson Farquhar, one of the richest men in England. They say he had more slaves than any of his peers. A great man the said, I think that's debatable don't you?'

Suki was looking into Henry Farquhar's carved eyes. They were hard, cold and haughty. His face was smooth but he stared at her from his pedestal with disdain. By the time Suki turned round to answer the old man, he was gone. Nowhere to be seen. It was as if he hadn't really been there at all. There was no one in the gallery, just Suki on her own. She sat on the bench at the side of the gallery and read the pamphlet about Ira Aldridge from cover to cover. She was in awe. Here was a man who against the odds had achieved huge accolades. He'd played 'Othello' in 1833 at one of the biggest theatres in London and taken Shakespeare to inaccessible parts of Russia and Serbia. He did this at a time when slavery was rife which meant black people were often regarded as no better than animals.

She looked at Henry Gibson Farquhar, on his pedestal with his impenetrable stare and it made her feel strangely triumphant. 'Here you are,' she thought, 'supposedly a great man of your time, immortalised in marble, stuck in a gallery in the middle of

inner city London being stared at and examined by people of all races. It must kill you, Mr Farquhar, to know that I am British. Did you ever think this would happen Henry? I am everything you must have fought against.'

Suki was about to leave the room when she had an idea. She walked over to the statue of Henry Gibson and turned him round so that all he could see with his deep carved eyes was the great Ira Aldridge. 'You lived a life of luxury based on other people's suffering, now you can spend your life in this hell seeing where it got you', she thought.

She stroked the statue of Ira Aldridge, the cool marble that made his eyes look so warm and alive. She thought the man who had spoken to her with the head of white hair looked a little like him, only older. She laughed at herself, dismissing it immediately. She walked out of the gallery clutching the pamphlet on her way to find her class. She saw them clustered round a painting, the guide finishing his lecture. Mr White looked around the group of Suki.

'Ready to tell us what you think of the Victorians Suki?' he asked as she hurried to join the group. He was expecting her to make an excuse as she always did.

'Yes sir,' she answered, eyes bright, 'I want to tell you about Ira Aldridge, the negro tragedian.'

Mr White was pleasantly surprised and managed a little smile. He realised that he was never too old to be surprised by yet another student.

Suki grinned back thinking, 'History isn't as dull as I thought'.