

Sewing the Seeds

by
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Miles Lawrence sat at his work desk in the fading light trying to concentrate. At 33 he had financed himself through college, worked hard at his apprenticeship as a tailor and set himself up in his own business by the time he was 25. It was a modest establishment, no bigger than a walk-in cupboard if truth be told but it was his shop and he was a businessman and his own boss.

He was fixing the waistband on a pair of trousers but he couldn't concentrate because his mind was preoccupied. How was he going to pay the bills? Initially work had been slow to come in, but eventually he had a steady stream of fairly reliable customers. But all they wanted were small repair jobs, taking in seams, letting out waists. He had tried to make bespoke suits in his own inimitable style but people either found them too modern or didn't have the money to pay for them. So he scraped by on menial work and rented out the small flat above the shop to help with the rent. But now, a decision had to be made. Carmel, his partner, was pregnant and getting increasingly frustrated with their lack of revenue. He knew she had a point but he'd spent heart and soul on this little shop and letting it go felt as if he'd failed.

At that moment grumpy old Mr Ghosh shuffled in. He never had a civil word but he lived upstairs and the only access to the flat was through the shop so unfortunately, Miles saw him regularly.

'Mr Ghosh,' said Miles barely polite.

'Hmmm,' grumped Mr Ghosh and was gone.

That just made Miles feel worse. What was he doing here? Why was he trying to make it work? He just wasn't good enough. He could see that now.

Miles worked late delaying the moment when he'd have to go and face Carmel. He strained to concentrate, it was dark outside now, dark and gloomy. Before he knew what was happening he was crying. Just quietly, privately, grieving for his dream. It was of course at this time that miserable Mr Ghosh chose to emerge from his flat. Miles tried to ignore him, what did he care, the man was obviously no good, he had no respect for anyone, not even himself. Quite unexpectedly Miles heard Mr Ghosh's rasping voice, 'What bird's nesting in your hat then?' he asked.

Miles didn't know whether to laugh or be angry. 'What?' he said.

'Men don't cry. That's just silly. Must be serious,' grunted Mr Ghosh.

'You don't need to concern yourself with my problems thank you very much,' said Miles archly, 'I'm sure you have plenty of your own to be going on with.'

The door to the shop opened and closed and Mr Ghosh was gone.

Miles thought nothing more of it. He had grown used to his lodger's bad manners over the months.

Ten minutes later Mr Ghosh returned. Miles didn't look up. He heard the rustle of a plastic bag and a thud on the table in front of him. It was a bottle of beer. Mr Ghosh opened one for himself and waited expectantly. 'Is it the wife?' said Mr Ghosh.

‘It’s not really any of your business...,’ began Miles.

‘I’ve been there. I know it, if that’s what you’re going through,’ Mr Ghosh looked at Miles, ‘Hang on tight my boy, try your hardest. I didn’t. I was weak. It’s worth all the effort you’ve got in your body.’

Miles was struck by Mr Ghosh’s honesty and his hostility began to melt. ‘It’s not that,’ he said, ‘it’s...it’s the shop,’ and he explained his predicament.

At the end of the tale Mr Ghosh said nothing. The men drank their beers in silence.

‘Tailoring’s a tough trade’, said Mr Ghosh.

‘Yeah,’ said Miles bitterly.

‘But it’s a classical skill that you must never take for granted. I’ve seen your work, not bad...but not great,’ said Mr Ghosh without apology.

‘Who do you think you are....?’ began Miles.

‘You try to give them something new but new styles go out of fashion so quickly. It’s the classic designs that best fit a body and compliment the contour of a man. If you went back in time and used more modern fabrics you’d progress. And a little help to make those seams crisp. You want to offer quality.’

Miles was gob-smacked. This bum of a man who he’d thought was probably a drunk or a cheat was talking about tailoring the way he felt about it. His eyes lit up and there was a true understanding of the craft. Miles didn’t know what to say.

Mr Ghosh chuckled, ‘Surprised you have I?’ he said looking straight at Miles’ face. ‘Judging this book by its cover you thought I was a zero huh, a nothing? Maybe you were right.’ Mr Ghosh sighed a heavy sigh.

Miles reached down into his private drawer and brought out a quart of whiskey and two mismatched glasses. He poured one for each of them. Mr Ghosh took his gingerly. ‘I came to this country in 1956. I was a master tailor, a craftsman of the highest order from Delhi. I was told the pickings here would be rich, lots of white sahibs needing linen suits. I came. I was good but I was proud. My attitude did me no favours when I couldn’t get a job. I wouldn’t allow them to say I wasn’t good enough, I spent my own money making samples and took them round the big fashion houses and though a few of them were impressed, no one would hire a coolie tailor from the dark continent. So I did what I should, married a nice woman, did a job that paid me a little but ruined my spirit. I drank to forget and I did. I forgot everything that mattered. She threw me out. I retired from my miserable job and here I am a big fat zero.’

‘Can you still do it?’ asked Miles, curious.

‘I never lost it if that’s what you mean,’ replied Mr Ghosh proudly.

‘How can you be sure?’ asked Miles honestly.

‘Give me a piece of nothing and see what I make you,’ challenged back Mr Ghosh.

Miles brought out an off cut of fine raw silk. He handed it doubtfully to Mr Ghosh who was looking increasingly hot around the collar. ‘Go home boy. Go look after that poor wife of yours. You think you know me, my type. I’ll show you. I’ll show every last one of you.’ And with that Mr Ghosh took the raw silk and disappeared into his flat.

Miles was a little unsettled by this outburst and not sure if Mr Ghosh wasn’t really

just a loser after all. Still he was tired. He could feel the alcohol had gone straight to his head. He locked up and went home. As he waited for the bus, something made him think that he wouldn't tell Carmel about his decision about the shop. Not yet.

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The next day Miles couldn't think whether in his exhaustion he'd imagined this bizarre exchange with Mr Ghosh. He was so exhausted, perhaps he was hallucinating. He opened up the shop. No sign of Mr Ghosh. He went to the door at the back of the shop and knocked. In a small voice he called, "Mr Ghosh? Are you there?" Miles almost jumped out of his skin when a voice emerged from behind him. 'I'm not on the other side quite yet my boy,' came Mr Ghosh's sturdy voice. The old man had been asleep under a clothes rail. Asleep on the floor like a tramp! Miles couldn't believe that he'd thought this man a master tailor. He let out a heavy sigh and resigned himself to the days' disappointments.

Mr Ghosh approached the desk and laid down a scrunch of cloth. Miles looked at it and recognised the raw silk. Impatiently he unravelled the beautiful material and instead of the flat piece of cloth he had given Mr Ghosh the night before, he saw the most exquisitely tailored shirt. Sweeping but precise cuts, delicate stitching, the collar and buttons were missing but it really was quite beautiful.

'Oh! said Miles taken aback.

'Ha ha!' said Mr Ghosh victorious.

The two men stood admiring the shirt as if they were in a gallery. After a long pause, Miles spoke, 'I have a proposition,' he said quietly. Mr Ghosh grinned. 'I wouldn't be able to pay much...to start with,' continued Miles, 'your work is really.... excellent.'

'Why thank you young man,' said Mr Ghosh.

'I don't want you to be insulted but my turnover is very small...'

continued Miles. 'Ah!' replied Mr Ghosh, 'but what price could you possibly put on making an old man's dreams come true?'

Miles looked deep into Mr Ghosh's brown, bright eyes and their partnership was confirmed in an instant.