

So What's Changed?

By Kim Farleigh

WHY WE LIKE IT: *A modernist short that almost has the feel of manifesto-theater. It's a take on the age old battle of the sexes but the author approaches it from a very different slant: the characters are not people so much personas identified by particular qualities or conditions. Thus the 'back-ache man', the 'standing man', the 'gasper', etc. We know none of their names, including that of the feminist revolutionary—the fulcrum of the story-- around whose statue the group has gathered. The question of feminism is pursued through dialogue exchange that touches on empiricism, naturalism and social determinism. We wonder if something of Beckett's nihilism isn't behind the deliberately mechanical and minimalist prose. Quote: Research was what the standing man did naturally. It's the one choice we all have. And being one of the few choices he had, he engaged in it. What choice did he have, but to engage in one of the few choices available to him? But most of all we love the overplayed lines like: 'the engineers buttocks crashed into her cotton dress' and 'smiled like a spotlight' and best of all 'her ankle-length dress, tied in at the waist, emphasising her boomerang curves, curves boomeranging before men's eyes.' Sweeeet!*

The statue's garden's low, black, iron fence bordered a half-metre-high, rectangular hedge, hedge and fence giving the statue solemn intimacy. The statue commemorated Spain's first female university student, its bowed head of tied up hair, and its body-length robe of flowing folds, suggesting hard-fought erudition.

Three women and two men on a guided walk faced the statue. One of the women was a thirty-six-year-old industrial engineer who spoke four languages, her black-framed glasses highlighting her white skin, black magnifying white and vice versa, a freckle archipelago, upon the shoals of her

cheeks, forming a chain of dark-brown islands, her ankle-length dress, tied in at the waist, emphasising her boomerang curves, curves boomeranging before men's eyes.

A wooden bench faced the statue.

The guide said: "This will take at least ten minutes. Sit on the bench if you like."

The three women raced to the bench and sat down.

The guide said: "She wasn't allowed to study with men. A teacher had to take her to a separate room. The teacher locked the room's door to keep her inside, the door locked from the outside."

Two of the women gasped. The engineer didn't. She was studying her WhatsApps. The guide didn't look offended. He earned the same whether people listened or not.

The gaspers occupied half the bench, almost touching, the engineer in the middle of the bench's other half. One of the men stood beside the engineer.

The guide continued: "She worked to ensure that women could get an education and have the same opportunities as men. She gave speeches asking women to stop being submissive to their husbands. She became the first woman to be accepted into the legendary arts and business society, *El Ateneo*, and the first woman to work as a university lecturer in Spain and one of this country's first female novelists."

The guide read an exchange, written by the legendary woman, between a man and a woman, the woman demanding equal rights, the man saying: "Impossible!" His contemporaries would have called him a maverick or insane for supporting equal rights.

"Impossible!" the woman screamed. "Isn't this supposed to be the age of equal rights?"

No such age will ever exist, the man beside the guide thought. Power maintains power to get increasingly more with increasingly less effort.

The seated women shunned sharing comfort. Having a rotation system where everyone took turns standing never entered their heads. Why should this have entered their heads? The men were irrelevant.

The legendary woman's busy social life with aristocrats and politicians ("she was a countess," the guide said) meant she had had many more opportunities than most people will ever have, the man beside the guide moving to ease his backache. He couldn't stand for long without his back aching.

The other man finally bent down and whispered to the engineer: "Can I.....?"

His voice was almost undetectable. He didn't want to highlight the engineer's obliviousness. Her head shot up when realising her thoughtlessness. She moved so the other man could sit down.

Will this teach her anything? Backache Man wondered. I doubt it. Nature guarantees that she can satisfy her needs easily. Any punishment she may receive would be so limited it would have no impact on her thinking, other than to assume that others were demented.

The guide said: "She advocated positivism. Positivism purported that the only authentic knowledge was scientific knowledge, that that knowledge could only be obtained through empiricism or the scientific method. This idea paralleled her belief in naturalism, an artistic style based on realism that permitted scientists to study people as if they were also objects, like other living creatures."

Research was what the standing man did naturally. It's the one choice we all have. And being one of the few choices he had, he engaged in it. What choice did he have, but to engage in one of the few choices available to him?

"She exposed society's contradictions in her works," the guide added, "and the arrogance that demanded that people only marry within their class."

The standing man put his left foot forward and arched his back. Changing positions reduced pain, so he changed positions regularly. Sitting had become a luxury, his satisfaction scale minute in comparison to the engineer's.

A passing pedestrian was asked to photograph the group under a sign that said: *The Garden of Feminists*. Had the statue's inspirer witnessed the bench events she may have had a more subtle vision.

And who believes in equal rights? the standing man thought. We believe in extending our privileges. Some people have naturally more chance of doing that than others. Things now are really naturalistic.

Afterwards, the two men, following the guide and the three women to the Metro, resembled useless appendages hanging off power's hierarchy. The engineer's buttocks crashed into her cotton dress, each thump making Backache Man think: "Those buttocks are privilege-giving powerhouses." Equal opportunities? he thought. How can they exist when some people can connect desire with opportunity, while others have no choice but to connect it with probable frustration?

At the Metro station, the women went their separate ways. The two men entered the Metro to catch different trains. Before parting, Backache Man asked the other: "Have you ever met a real feminist?"

The other man's chin rose. His smooth, tanned skin indicated that his hair had turned grey prematurely.

"Maybe," he replied. "But I can't think of anyone at the moment. And you?"

"One of my grandmothers. She used to point out how some types of legislation were unfair towards men."

"Really?"

"Yes. Apart from her, I can't think of anyone else."

"Now, in Spain, because of economic differences, people don't have equal access to education."

"How many rich women have you heard complain about that?"

The man with the smooth, brown face smiled like a spotlight.

"Maybe your grandmother would have complained about that," he said.

"She definitely would have. Maybe she's a dying breed in a world that loves privileges?"

When Backache Man's train began slowing down to stop, he moved to where he predicted a door would open before him, getting there just before a woman who had raced towards the door from the opposite direction. He was training himself to not let his gentlemanly upbringing give women undue advantages. After all, they believed in equal rights. The woman, who had flown towards him from the other direction, had demonstrated by her speed that there was nothing wrong with her physically and that therefore no extra consideration should have been shown towards her. She had tried to reach the door before him and had lost; but she hadn't given up trying to get into the carriage before him to grab a seat. She thrust her left arm in front of him to press the button that opened the door. She had seen that door, therefore she believed it was hers. He, however, didn't agree. She had to pull her arm out of the way as he entered the carriage. He got the only available seat. She stared at him as she walked by, trying to induce guilt. He stared back. She looked away, the first time he had felt proud, instead of contrite, for beating a woman to a seat.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The story was inspired by a guided walk I went on in Madrid in Spain. The walk was about Spain's first feminists. This story explores the idea that people aren't interested in equal rights, but in extending their privileges, that equal rights is an idea used by people when it suits them. My literary influences include Hemingway, Conrad, Bellow, Fitzgerald and Greene.

BIO: Kim has worked for NGO's in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine and Macedonia. He likes to take risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes painting, art, bull-fighting, photography and architecture, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. Although he wouldn't say no to living in a Swiss ski resort or a French chateau. 172 of his stories have been accepted by 100 different magazines.