

## Always Keep Between the Lines by Sean Webster

Gladiatorial feelings stirred at the park entrance as he curled his fingers into a compact ball. The timeless mantra balanced precariously on his tongue. *Non ducor, duco*. His nostrils flared at the newly discovered freshness of lilies, sweet alyssum, and lavender. First visit to the amphitheatre since that fateful day he took Landy to the cleaners almost forty years ago. *Forty*.

A thick sheet of scuffed Perspex protected the park map, making some sections difficult to read. A crude oil spill didn't help—Jono proclaimed his love for Cara, and someone—pray, not Jono—signed off with a cock and balls. He winced at the prospect of a child lifted to see the map. *Is there a new climbing frame in the play area Mummy?*

'Warm enough, Dad?'

'Bloody roasting.' As if to prove it, he ragged his shirt to billow in some air underneath. Clambering from car to wheelchair had turned his face the shade of a rocket's warhead. She pushed him in the wheelchair past the park map onto the main path and gasped.

'What are those?'

'Eh?'

She jabbed her index finger down towards moth-eaten grey trainers resting on the foot supports. Against black trousers, bare feet wouldn't have stood out as much. 'Those!'

He looked down and smiled. 'Oh, those. You mean my Smokin' Joes.'

'Your, what?'

'My finest pair of running shoes.' He twitched his matching grey whiskers in mock contempt.

‘Seriously? They look like your old gardening ones. Mum would—’ She dragged her bottom lip under gleaming veneers and scurried to safety behind the wheelchair. ‘Running shoes, tch. Let me know before you speed off, won't you? I'll be sure to stop pushing.’

It was mid-morning and relatively quiet. Mostly dog walkers, enjoying a stroll and only stooping to collect a parcel or suspiciously looking around and moving on. She pushed towards a sprawling rowan tree, where the path diverged into three directions.

‘Which way?’ Violet acrylic nails tapped the black wheelchair grips.

‘Why, this way of course.’ He theatrically stuck out his left arm.

‘Course it is,’ she muttered on seeing the gentle incline ahead.

An avenue of towering sycamores on either side of the path rose toward the museum. Far reaching branches shook hands high above the walkway, making an oath to pledge sanctuary from the elements.

‘I can't be too long, Dad, got to do my housework and shopping before work this afternoon.’

‘Wagons roll.’

He pointed out an indistinguishable sycamore to the right of the path and asked to be wheeled next to it. After admiring it for a moment, he affectionately patted a brittle ridge of bark that snapped off and crumbled between his bony fingers.

*I lean against the rugged trunk of the sycamore to finish my calf stretches. Warm weather draws a crowd, milling together in lurid high-tech trainers and garish shorts and vests, like an explosion in a paint factory. Bubbles of excitement pop as rivals yap fitness, training, sleep, diet, and weather. Brave souls hint at the mere whiff of an elusive PB. My midweek training thrived like a quenched sunflower, and I had administered the prescribed carb-up on pasta with generous sides of sleep and water.*

*Starting close to the sycamore meant not getting boxed in and a good view of arch-rival Landy in his yellow and black club vest. Landy bagged front centre like every old school photo, no doubt.*

*The race starter triggers an adrenaline shot. A sultan's majestic tapestry of dappled, vivid colour unfurls. I stick to the inside as Landy trailblazes toward the museum. He holds the first corner like a damn gazelle bounding effortlessly across the savanna.*

His Smokin' Joes instinctively bounced on the foot supports as she pushed past the Roman granary ruins at the back of the museum.

'Quick look here, Dad?'

'No, this is the finish. We'll see it later.'

Her violet nails dug into the black, shiny grips.

'You don't mind, do you?' A rear wheel snapped a twig. 'I could ask Clive if you prefer?'

Her jaw tightened. She quickened the pace but couldn't stop the words bubbling up like acid reflux. 'He only comes when he feels like it. Even then, it's only for a game of pissing chess.'

His neck joints creaked for mercy as he twisted his head sharply. 'Carol—'

'—he doesn't appreciate I work too. Shopping. Housework. Kids. Who is it that takes you for all your checkups? Huh? Who?'

'Sorry, I—'

'—it's not your fault, Dad. Oh, forget it.' She ground to a halt and squeezed his hand gently, but her plastic smile melted as soon as she returned to the black, rigid handles.

The empty path narrowed, descending past more rowan trees and a drooping cherry blossom. Her hands loosened, encouraging the wheelchair to gain momentum. He

didn't seem to notice. She let go and watched it roll away. One arm's-length. Two arm's-length. Further and further towards the edge. Drifting. Escaping. Liberating. *Oh, God, forgive me!* She raced forward and lunged for the grips, catching them just before a rear wheel clattered the metal railing.

*I chew up the path, racing past an ancient beech tree with weird, sprawling branches. A flash of yellow and black—two bees desperate for fresh pollen—Landy and his running club buddy, Ferguson. They dart around the cenotaph out of view. I panic and lengthen my stride, trying to shake off another annoying bee and two shadows lurking behind me.*

The wheelchair trundles past the Coronation beech, planted in the 1830s according to the sign, toward the mighty sandstone cenotaph. For the first time, he noticed a giant iron sword welded to one side of the monument, adding to its aura of defiance. *How could I have missed that?* The rear revealed a series of gunmetal plaques listing the fallen from each military unit. His shaking finger bumped over embossed letters etched on the harsh, cold metal. He felt haunted by the times he'd skipped over poppy trays and dodged wreaths laid out front. It now felt like he'd been scrambling over front-line infantry lying dead in trenches. Crestfallen, he groped for her hand. She nuzzled her face into his—warm, smooth skin scratching against wrinkly boot leather— and wrapped her arm all the way around him. *When had that become possible?*

All those runs in the park meant he'd only ever heard his respiratory tract in overdrive. Air in through the nose; lungs like bellows stoking the furnace of his heart. But now, the light splash of a water fountain was interspersed with tweets and whistles from wrens, tits, and robins in the memorial garden. The gentle rustle of leaves carried a child's laughter that turned to cries as lunchtime blew in too early.

*I hit the sweet spot—stride and breathing perfectly synchronised. Ferguson grimaces, and his unregulated breathing becomes faint as I glide past. See ya, Fergie. Landy races past the bandstand, anxiously checking over his shoulder.*

Six pairs of ornate, white pillars support a green dome. Under the bandstand, he imagined the white circular floor as a smoother version of the moon's surface. He tapped her arm, but she knew what was coming. She hooked under his armpits and gently lifted. He grimaced, letting out a low rumble as Bambi knees buckled. A human question mark unable to straighten. People floated past in private bubbles as he held onto her, begging for his Smokin' Joes to move.

He noticed her silver heels first, and then the flowing satin hem of her emerald dress supported by thin straps over bare, freckled shoulders. His wife gleamed as he smoothed his dinner jacket and took her porcelain hand. Polished black leather brogues replaced his Smokin' Joes. They glided back and forth as one, across the sea of tranquillity, twisting and dipping beneath a glistening galaxy of stars.

He held her hand high and bowed. When he looked back up, he saw the same pale blue eyes of his daughter and tried desperately to mask his remorse. They were both still planted beside the wheelchair, having barely moved. He swiped a glistening glob of dribble from his grey whiskers and flopped down. His limbs floundered to the harbour of the padded rests. *The damn chair was both his prison and his escape.*

Screams of delight reverberated. *Try this. Come here. Catch me.* As the play area clamour faded, they travelled a narrow path that curved uphill. Birch trees provided a cool shadow and quiet refuge. She juggled a decision but kept dropping her assertions.

Sunningdale—a local care home with around fifty residents. Modern, clean, friendly staff,

seemingly happy residents. But would *he* be happy?

'I've been thinking about Sunningdale, Dad.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Between us, we could afford it. But I'd much rather you moved in with us.' She waited pensively. 'Dad?'

'Look at me, Carol.' He held out his arms and grimaced when he tried to do the same with his legs. 'I don't want to be a burden to you.'

*Always keep between the lines, he gently encouraged, displaying unwavering patience as she concentrated on colouring the dragon's fire with an orange crayon. And put that tongue away. She frowned, sticking it out further, while carefully filling the flames. Years later, after the formalities of her wedding, he passed her a napkin. A drawing of her as a Disney princess with the same words underneath. Always keep between the lines.*

'You'll never be a burden, Dad.'

He blew his nose into an embroidered birthday hanky bearing his initials. It was the one she'd given him two years ago when his legs still worked. 'Nearly at the finish now. Wagons roll.'

*My leg muscles rage with fire. My face writhes in pain. Landy, fifty metres away, chugs like an engine low on diesel. I demand more. My arms are pumping pistons. My white vest a second layer of skin plastered in a river of sweat.*

*The incline levels. The gap shrinks. The spectators roar. Landy looks left as I burst past on the right. My Smokin' Joes vape. My ears ring. My heart thunders. I surge across in first, instinctively stop my watch, and raise my right arm in victory. A thunderbolt of dizziness strikes as I attempt to view the finish time through budget binoculars. But where's my breath? I made no deal with Satan and won a fair fight. Scaly, black talons*

*pierce my skin like tent pegs pinning me to the grass. Someone says ambulance. For Landy? I try to raise my head, but it's too heavy. My body tightens, then spasms. Muffled voices give the sensation of being submerged. My body heaves like Clive's bouncing on me to get breakfast. I want to get him some Cheerios, but I can't move. Satisfied he's bounced me awake, he smiles and turns off the bright light. Good lad. I'll introduce him to chess later.*

*Someone in a green uniform places my 17:48 trophy arm under a blanket and asks me to wiggle my toes. I humour her and watch my Smokin' Joes salute me from the bottom of a stretcher.*

'Ice-cream or coffee, Dad?'

'You get something, love, I'm an athlete remember.'

She smiled and wandered toward the small café at the back of the museum, leaving him positioned on the same pasture where he had his chest pumped all those years ago. Indistinguishable faces had crowded over to see who it was. He was incredibly grateful the volunteers acted so quickly back then, but now things were different.

As he admired the panoramic bluebell meadow, flanked by birch trees, his heart slowed like the meandering trickle of a mountain spring struggling to reach a creek. *After all these years, it's been grand to finally see the park.* He raised his right arm in victory. *Non ducor, duco.* The sun's eternal flame withered the spring, leaving Smokin' Joes marooned on the padded footrests.

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