

Bourne
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creative writing
workshops

Madeleine

by Marion Umney

Madeline was 55 when she started to wonder. Maybe this was the menopause she thought. It was crazy. What was she, a happily married Anglo Indian catholic woman, doing wondering about her gender; whether she was in the right body or not? It was absurd.

Nevertheless it was unsettling and Madeleine didn't like unsettled. She was the pragmatic one, the organiser. Without her James wouldn't be the successful artist that he was. She organised the shows and exhibitions, contacted the agents, reminded him of his deadlines, did the accounts, kept the children away from him when he needed to work. He'd be lost without her or they'd starve – one or the other.

She had been to Mass and it was raining. A tall, statuesque woman, loose-limbed and elegant, she marched up the hill, her broolly shielding her dark curly hair and chiselled features. No, she wouldn't go home yet. She needed to think. She pushed the door into the café and took a seat overlooking the river. Yorkshire was beautiful this time of year, even in the rain. She was glad they had moved from London, she enjoyed the peace and the slower pace of life. She eyed the menu. The cakes didn't appeal, just her usual Earl Grey Tea with just a splash of milk would be fine.

Where was this feeling coming from? Admittedly she had always wanted to be a boy. As the oldest girl in a family of seven she was envious of her brothers. The boys could play football and cricket. In Calcutta that was the game! She was expected to stay at home, to clean and tidy and to cook. This was India and girls were decidedly inferior citizens! It annoyed her and she looked to her English father to overrule her Anglo-Indian mother, but he didn't.

The only advantage of being a girl had been ballet. She had loved it and she'd been good, in spite of her size. She dreamed of being a dancer and her mother had worried.

"Dreams are what you wake up from" she warned her.

Ma was right. Madeleine had been too big. She had wept when she overheard the principal saying, "Such a shame about Madeleine, now if she had been a boy she could have gone places, with her strength and athleticism alongside that natural grace."

James had always admired her grace. He tried to capture the way she moved when he painted her, but never quite managed.

She didn't dance now. She made do with teaching yoga. Once people realised she wasn't Spanish, but of Indian extraction there was an expectation that she would be a good yoga teacher. Some of the class hung off her words as if she were a mystic, which amused her. They were surprised when they found out she was a Catholic. That always irritated her, their narrow-minded, unconscious racism.

Well, she couldn't change that any more than she could change her gender. You were made what you were and you just had to get on with it. She sighed, sipped her tea and got out her notepad. Now what did she need to get for supper?