

Gladiators

“It was the other day, well more like the other week, maybe last month -why do I always say ‘the other day’? Anyway, I’d meant to take my son on The Five Valley’s Walk.”

“The Five Valley’s Walk, is that in Stroud?”

“Yeah, it’s this walk for the Meningitis trust. They do it every year. It goes along the cycle path from Stroud to Nailsworth. It’s a gentle day’s walking.”

“Anyway, we’re gonna stay at me Dad’s that weekend so I invite him to come along. He says he’s doing an assault course in Cardiff and would we like to come? I think on it for a bit and ditch the walk, which was a shame because I was gonna meet up with someone I haven’t seen in years.”

“Who’s that?”

“Oh, Ellie, you haven’t met her.

So, anyway, we stay over me Dads’, we get up in the morning and I drive us all over to Cardiff. We get there and it’s like a big event in the new docks development. All banners and PA systems and flyers and stalls promoting various things. I have this realisation that the event isn’t about the obstacle course, it’s about getting people to

interact with the brand *Men's Health*, which I've realised just this second is like *Cosmo* for men, but anyway we set up camp with some cheese and pickle rolls, some crisps, you know: and we've got blankets and we're all set up by the start finish which has a travelator."

"Travelator? Do you mean those moving walkways you find in airports?"

"Remember Gladiators? The last obstacle was a moving walkway on a slope, but moving against you, so it's really hard to run up."

"Ah, yes, my favourite was 'Wolf'"

"Yeah, I was always a sucker for 'Jet', she was always showing a bit of cleavage. Anyway, this start/finish has got three of these travelators; all at different speeds like easy, medium and hard. It's really hard to tell between medium and hard, though. I stared at it for ages.

Anyway, we wait for the first people to finish so we can watch them attempt it. The first contenders arrive and boss it. I guess you'd expect that, so we wait for the main group of runners to come along. So, as time goes by the stream of people starts to swell into a kind of river: we start to see the first few who struggle a bit. Some fall over, but most, in fact, almost all, keep trying till they get it. Some of them take three or four goes."

"I hate watching people struggle. Was it hard to watch them?"

"Well, yes and no. It was sort of fascinating. You see, a pattern emerges. A good proportion of them fall or slip because they misjudge their footing speed compared to that of the belt. I'm sure it's harder than it looks. But there's a subclass, sorry..." He looks right into her eyes, across the gap between their faces and moves a hand onto the leg she's leaning against him and sighs; his speech slows.

"...I hate that kind of terminology, a class, sorry, I'll get this; there's a set within the set of the fallers or stumblers that don't do this. They get all the way to the top, and the last step where you have to sort of do one last push onto the static platform they just bail. They give up. I've no doubt that the last step takes a little more in their respective reserves but, I mean, it can't be that hard just to push that little extra. They've all got *that* far."

"So you watch them give up?" She looks right at him, into him, puts her hand on his.

She moves further in; they kiss, but he wants to finish the story.

"It's like they have the idea of how, but they don't have it in them to take the last step and reach their goal."

"Is this important?"

"I dunno. I mean I'm telling you..."

The sky is red and orange. Clouds are moving in from the south. It's beginning to get cold.

"It stayed with me though."