

The Lifebloom Gift

Abdul Adan

Two days ago, I was fired from my TSA job at the airport. My boss convinced some offended fool to press sexual harassment charges against me. This was like the most preposterous thing. Everyone at work knows I am straight. I have nothing sexual whatsoever for men. I know it, my workmates know it, and the boss knows it. Even the offended fool knows it. I am just not the guy to like another guy sexually. Just before breaking the tragic news to me, my cold brute of a boss (Oh my, you should see the asshole! He has this bony, unlovable nose) took pains to explain my alleged offence. He said I had a tendency to *settle* when carrying out frisk searches.

I did use the word *settle* before, that much I concede. But it was nothing as creepy as he made it out to be. It was really just a break-room joke. A female workmate from the inner city had spilled her coffee and bent down to wipe it up. She had just removed her TSA uniform and placed it in the locker. She must have already clocked out or something. Anyway, I caught sight of her dangling breasts from the corner of my eye, and there he was! In my mind, Ted Lifebloom himself was kneeling to her right and trying to get his fat hands in there. But Ted was no longer a mother-loving child at this point. He was a giant of an adult and his hands wouldn't fit into the little space between her armpit and vest. So he lay below her, arms upwards, pulled her close into a kneeling position and made the loud wish of *settling* there forever. Now, I didn't do any of that, didn't go for the opening, nor did I *settle* between

her bent torso and the floor. I only, harmlessly, said to my friendly supervisor that one could *settle* between her and the floor. You see, it was a comment one couldn't resist, given the circumstances. As for the 'tendency' my boss accuses me of, it was only one other occasion. Not enough to justify being called a 'tendency'.

Once in a while, a traveller comes along who feels like Ted Lifebloom. He or she doesn't have to be male or female, as the particular gift of Ted Lifebloom isn't a gender-based one. There are many women and men out there who have fleshy faces, soft chests (flat or full, it doesn't matter) and round necks with those sexy, fat rings. It might sound simple when put like that, but hear me out. The particular gift isn't really in the aforementioned features themselves. It's more like the features are *qualifiers* for the gift. One has to be touched by Ted or be a student of Ted's to be aware of the gift. A great number of people out there have no idea about their special place in the universe. Thousands or even millions of Lifebloomers.

That morning, a Turkish male came through the screening door at Lambert Airport. I knew immediately he stepped up for his search that he was a Lifebloomer. How did I know? Well, let's just say he had a fleshy face and a pebble of sweet on his earlobe. Being so generous, I decided right there and then, to, in the most subtle way, have him contemplate the Ted in his heart. Often, the fleshy-faced Lifebloomers (as opposed to those with hairy arms and pockets of fat under their abdomens), possess a mole behind their knees. To get them thinking, one had to locate the mole with the right thumb and press it. Fortunately, the traveller in this case was wearing shorts, which made things much easier. All I had to do was frisk him all the way down and pause at the back of his knee. Then I would momentarily *settle* on the mole. Don't get me wrong; I realize how creepy this sounds for those who don't understand. I was smart about it though. As soon

as I got to the mole, I faced the challenge of devising a time-buying trick. I needed a good excuse for a 30-second press of my thumb at one spot on the back of his knee. Not an easy task, as anyone might guess. Here's what I did: I ran my hands on his body from the shoulders down, pausing routinely at the pockets, and, on arrival at the spot where I perceived the mole to be, feigned temporary dizziness. Leaning with my left hand on the ground, my face downwards, I went into a brief ecstasy, excited by the Lifeblooming agent hidden in the mole. Like all ignorant Lifebloomers, the man jerked his leg forward to shake off my grip, but I managed to hold on for a full 30 seconds. When he complained later, it was really useless. Everyone knew about my overly sensitive nose. His smelly shoes, as any wise person would assume, must have caused my dizziness on the spot. Still, I told my stupid boss (who kept a record of the event anyway) that I was nauseated by the traveller's perfume and was nearly unconscious for a few seconds – I needed that knee for support. I don't think he believed me then but who cares really? You can't fire a man for having an overly sensitive nose, much less for being a Lifebloomer.

My own journey of self-discovery started when I was working for a medical transportation agency some years ago. I drove a middle-aged woman from St Louis to the small town of Lonely Nest, Missouri. Her house was at the end of a long street, which featured uncountable Baptist churches, at least one Episcopalian church and a post office. I wouldn't have known there was an Episcopalian church if the old lady hadn't told me about it. I unloaded her stuff and helped her into her yard where I saw her fat son of about 30 outside, napping on the grass. A greyish Akita dog slept on his chest. On seeing us arrive, he sat up and asked, 'Mum, did someone help you with the stuff?' He could see me right there! Well, at least that was what I thought. His mum asked me to shake his hand, after which we spoke briefly. He seemed interested,

but kept averting his gaze. But then, his mum disappeared into the house and the fat son, whom she introduced as Ted, gave me the kindest look ever. I thought I saw the universe in his eyes – the future and the past, and most of God's holy best. His mouth was small, his nose was fleshy, his cheeks were round, his hands were hairy, and his eyes, well, watery – if one may say so.

A few days later his mum had an appointment at Barnes Jewish Hospital in St Louis. I drove down to pick her up and, Ted, against her wishes, joined us. They both sat at the back. In the parking lot, his mum told me to watch him, which, in hindsight, was very selfish of her. She didn't want him going around stimulating other Lifebloomers from their unknowing stupor. Anyway, the next few minutes gave me a first-hand idea of why I had to watch Ted. His mum wasn't gone five minutes before Ted reached over and placed his hand on my shoulder and pretty much (as I came to learn later) *settled*. I am not sure how long his hand was there because I got carried into a greenish world I had only seen in dreams until then. Everything seemed as though I was on some yet-to-be-formulated drug. It was a thing of the heavens. Let me put it this way: I heard the song of birds and sneezes of horses, smelled the fur of dogs, felt a twitch in one of my nipples which, in turn, transformed into a brown lactating nipple... In short, I understood the meaning of love – almost. And this was just the shoulder! Suppose he got to my mole! Can you imagine that? I am now like the next thing after him among Lifebloomers. Ted not only had the gift to take you to that greenish world by a touch of his hand, but could transfer some of his gifts to you. To really use it, you have to be a bearer of at least one special mole and be willing to help other Lifebloomers discover themselves.

Not long after meeting Ted, I spotted an advert in a local scientific monthly. They were asking anthropology students at universities all over the state to send proposals for articles

on animal and human expressions of love. A probably blond and flat-chested student from Mizzou had an article published about bonobos settling their quarrels by having gentle sex, which, really, was some superficial crap. So I thought, why not share the Lifebloom gift? I asked his mum if I could interview Ted about his life and she said yes. She didn't ask why. She knew I was either infected or had somehow discovered my Lifebloom status. Truth be told, I had no idea I was a Lifebloomer. I just knew Ted was a very special person. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for what was to come. The following is the case study I eventually sent to the magazine. I ask readers to politely disregard any references to abnormal conditions. Some of these are conclusions reached before my own awakening. I also ask the more generous readers to interpret the conditions as side effects of being the epicentre of the Lifebloom gift. It is not an easy responsibility. Trust me.

Blooming Ted: A Case Study

Introduction

Born in Lonely Nest, Missouri in 1978, to white Episcopalian parents, Ted Lifebloom was 30 years old when I met him. His mother worked as a registered nurse throughout Ted's childhood. His father ran a Bible school at home in Lonely Nest. I came to learn about his special condition during a ride to St Louis when I drove his mother to a hospital appointment. While we waited for his mother in the parking lot, Ted placed his hand on my shoulder for what seemed like forever (although it was actually three minutes according to my watch) and informed me, without speaking, of his special abilities. He essentially sent me into a trance within seconds of contact with my shoulder, during which I learned something of the meaning of love. If only Ted's specialness was restricted to that! Ted is a sacrificial lamb of messianic proportions. The following information was gathered through a series of interviews with his parents, his former girlfriend and Ted himself.

Background

Ted lived with his mother and father until he was 20, after which his parents divorced and he remained with his mother. Between the ages of two and ten, while his mother worked as a nurse in St Louis, Ted saw her only on weekends. His childhood needs during this time were attended to by young females who came to his father's yard for their Bible lessons. His mother told me that, at one of his schools, a teacher said young Ted was too sentimental.

Whenever his mother came home on weekends, young Ted nearly always kept his hands in her blouse through the arm opening. On days that she wore blouses with loose sleeves, he was happier. He could get his hands in much easier than if the sleeves were tight and the collar was too far out of reach. He was once even said to have attempted a swift vertical reach through his mother's tight collar, during which he nearly choked her when his elbow got trapped between her chin and her neck. One evening, while his mother was away, a seven-year-old Ted had taken a pair of scissors and modified all of her tight blouses under both armpits, just so he could slide his hands in better and feel her breasts when she wore them. The manner of his touch, his mother said, was not exactly of a fondling nature. He would cup the breast in one of his palms and keep it there until his hands sweated against the breast. Sometimes he climbed into her bed while she slept and placed his hands on the narrow, smooth path between her breasts.

His father, whom I located in a retirement home in Mahomet, Illinois, admitted that he had been so fond of his son that he hadn't been able to resist cuddling him even as the boy approached pubescence.

Ted himself told me that to experience something, one had to touch it. He denied the existence of anything he couldn't touch, including air, the sun, the sky, the moon, and people he hadn't touched or at least brushed shoulders with. The untouched individual, he said, is a nonentity. To claim a place in Ted's gloriously green universe, the individual has to be touched.

Ted's former girlfriend, Elizabeth, who had since taken a job at a massage parlour in University City, Missouri, told me that Ted wasn't too different from her other lovers. 'He just touched a lot,' she said. In their love-making, she said Ted preferred the missionary position and, in positioning himself between her legs, he made such moves that I understood to be a mere settling on his part. She said she did not mind Ted's tendency to settle. Quite the contrary: she said it was the most attractive part of their six-year relationship and that, had he been more conventionally emotional, she would still have been with him. Apparently, Ted did not care much for the orgasm at the end. He simply relished every inch of the journey through her moist, corrugated innards, and stayed therein as long as he could, looking around abstractedly at the empty air in the room, and making such loud statements as 'I wish you were as big as this whole space so I could swim your entirety.'

In the light of this, I should mention that Ted has never swum in anything. I also learnt from his mother that Ted suffers from bouts of temporary amnesia that can visit him every ten minutes. Once, during one of our interviews, Ted politely asked me to offer him my head so he could stroke it and reassure himself of my existence, to which I assented gladly. The bliss of his touch is, however, something that, unfortunately, much of the world out there will never experience. It defies every adjective. All I can think of now, in my generous bid to describe what it was like, are visions of smoothness (of any surface really), of special moles found on the bodies of aristocratic females of Kazakhstan, the dreadlocks of brotherly black men, the humble delicacy of certain unreachably shy females, the freckled faces of English tourists on African beaches, the moans of Asian porn stars.

Analysis

Young Ted was severely overprotected by his father. There's no doubt about that. In fact, his father was one of those extremely cuddly people with perpetually water-filled eyes. He did not so

much shake my hand as caress it when we met in Mahomet. He had a giggle about him that seemed to tickle anyone in his presence, after which he always brushed some wet residue from his eyes.

Ted's mother was a tall, brown-haired woman, with shiny seductive eyes, the charm of which she had retained into middle age. Her breasts were youthful, and her feet were small and fidgety. When she hugged her friends, it was tight but brief, almost furtive. She seemed like she was in too much hurry for her age, and she had no business being busy really. Her eyes, unlike those of Ted's father, were clear and sharp – with darting glances. She laughed often and made a joke of nearly everything, much to Ted's displeasure. Her comments about Ted were made without any discernible emotion. It was as though she were a physician analysing a remote patient she hadn't even seen yet. I imagined the ten years she'd lived alone with Ted, after his father's move back to Mahomet, to be filled with uncountable days where Ted, too heavy to keep up with his mother, sat in the middle of the living room watching her slender figure walk from one corner of the house to another. I also imagine this period to contain such little scenes as her fat son pulling his perpetually hurrying mother by the end of her skirt in an attempt to settle on some soft part of her. Yet she seemed to care for Ted, tended to his needs, but, even in my presence, pulled back her hand from him to prevent him from, as she said jokingly, 'settling on it.'

Once, when Ted was 25, his uncle visited him and asked if he might consider finding a job (for Ted was pretty much slothful). Ted didn't really understand how one went about getting a job. He asked the uncle, for instance, to tell him more about jobs, including about their colour and texture, and especially their texture. When he was told one needed hard work to attain personal independence, the already overweight Ted stood up from his seat immediately and made two circular laps around the room, before coming back to sit down, saying amid gasps: 'This is it. Hard work itself.' No matter what was said to explain

to him the idea of it, Ted's hard work never evolved beyond his indoor walks. Sometimes he bent down dejectedly and shook his head, like someone in mourning, lamenting his life. When asked why, he answered that it was what distressed people did, and unemployed people were supposed to be distressed.

Ted couldn't grasp any abstractions and simply saw everything as bits to be done and lived. He would shake his head or yell to express sadness or sorrow, and would walk about to respond to such phrases as 'work hard'. I surmised that Ted's excessively cuddly father, in combination with his loving but somewhat detached mother, confused him, turning him into a cloying wreck whenever he felt positively disposed towards another. His memory lapses are results of his mother's emotional and physical unavailability. Every time he'd reached out to her for comfort and, thereby, registered inside of himself her unquestionable loving presence, she had withdrawn suddenly, and sent his collective, cuddly feelings into dispersal, leading him to question if she had been there in the first place.

Once he had an attack of his memory lapses in my presence and had to ask me to offer him an arm, a leg, a neck, or a shoulder every ten minutes. On one of those occasions, so unsure of my existence was he that he felt my arm all the way to the elbow and further up to my armpit, settling us both into a greenish trance until his mother ran in to free us by shouting, as one would to a stubborn horse, 'snap out of it!' The second time it happened, she couldn't get any response to her verbal commands and had to hit him on the ankle with a baseball bat, fracturing it. I conclude that Ted suffers from an acute case of Sentimental Languor. (Reprinted with the permission of Klaus & Debbie's Science Magazine, St Louis)

It should go without saying that, by the end of my case study, I had understood that Ted was love itself in human form. I knew also that Ted and I had a responsibility to help one more Lifebloomer at least. You see, Ted had already informed

me that I was a genuine article from the Lifebloom factory that exists somewhere in the Alatau mountains and whose airborne agents make their way to a select few unborn foetuses. Both Ted and his mother agreed that Ted had at least six moles on the back of his body. The moles, said Ted, were all in special spots.

One evening, I mentioned the issue of moles to my sister, just in passing. I did not say what the moles were for. Just that some people have special ones, whereupon my saintly sister informed me of an elderly man residing in the nursing home she was working at, who had five moles on his back parts, and at least one of those, she said doubtfully, was behind the knee. Within a week, Ted and I set off for St Charles, to the nursing home where the potential Lifebloomer was residing. Ted had on a pair of khaki shorts, a white shirt, and a small grey coat he could barely wrap around his round belly. I drove the entire way to that nursing home in St Charles. I was going to park under the trees behind the parking lot (in case they had a CCTV) but Ted said we should park at a gas station a mile away and walk to the nursing home so he could feel the Lifebloomer's energy in gradual bits.

'This is it,' said Ted, a few minutes into the walk.

'What do you sense, Darlingness?' I asked. I often called him things like 'sweetness', 'darlingness' or 'sweet moles'. It is all love, really. They mean nothing, trust me. I don't ever even make fun of him.

'This is it,' repeated Ted. 'This is the man who could inherit my place. We are approaching a possible second epicentre here.'

Three days later, under the directions of Ted, we returned to the nursing home armed with four clothes pegs. The idea was that we would hold four of the moles by the pegs, while Ted *settled* on the fifth mole. So into the nursing home we walked, all smiles, pausing to greet and shake hands with some of the old ladies in the lounge. We were always civil

like that, really. Our session with the special Lifebloomer (who so far had refused to speak to anyone who wasn't his family) was to take approximately three minutes. With quick steps, Ted and I, one after another, made our noble presence known to him. He was seeing us for the first time so you can imagine how *unsettled* he got. He was probably unstable too. You need not be sane to lead the Lifebloom world.

Ted was quick to take the old man's alarm bell away from him lest he called anyone. I grabbed his little wrinkly hands and told him to stay mute or face the Lifebloom wrath. That was it. We pulled down his pyjamas and set the pegs in the right order. The old fool kept squirming and convulsing so much that I had to hold him down by his back as Ted tended to each mole. Well, Ted pretty much *settled* with each press of the peg, causing much overstimulation to the poor man. But what option did we have? If he had stayed still I would have handled the pegs while Ted tended to the special fifth mole. When the pegs were in place Ted descended on the mole behind the knee with much care. Really, all he did, given the special circumstance, was suck on it to see if it would change colour. For sometimes, said Ted, extraordinary Lifebloom agents make themselves known by changing their colour. Once we were done, we climbed through the window, leaving the pegs in place. I climbed back in, seconds later, just before he got out of his Lifebloom trance, and wrote our unregistered cell number on his arm with the instructions, 'Call us tomorrow at 4pm and we will tell you all about it.'

The next day Ted and I sat in one of the bars in the Delmar Loop of St Louis and waited for the ignorant Lifebloomer's call. The hour passed and no call came. Ted kept going back and forth between the bathroom and the tables shaking the hands of perfect strangers as we waited. By sundown, it was time for Ted to express his grief about the failure of our project. I had the responsibility of leading him away from crowds so he could bend and shake his head, yell and kick pavements as necessary. Sometimes I felt so sorry for poor Ted that I had

him sit down and stroked his chest, carefully staying clear of the Lifebloom agents that populated his body. Finally, he was quiet and did not say a word until halfway through the ride back to Lonely Nest, when he asked that I pull over so he could pee. He walked down through the shrubs, down the slope from the road, and, without looking back, disappeared into the darkness. It was the last I saw of Ted Lifebloom. If I had known he was going to disappear I would have pulled by the roadside much earlier, just so we could excite each other's moles and have a final swim in the green world of love, of wisdom and ecstasy. Lord, how it hurt to see him vanish without warning! I drove back to St Louis and, after a week of immersion, or rather, *settlement*, among the comfiest of pillows, applied for a job at the dreaded TSA, where I hoped to carry out my Lifebloom duty by assessing potential Lifebloomers. And now, thanks to my brutish boss, there goes the job and any hope of locating an inheritor to Ted.

If, in my trial for sexual harassment, the soft-faced Magistrate of St Louis asks me to simplify for the court some of the grand visions of the Lifebloom ecstasy, I will give a list of images that include giant snakes slithering on bare backs of sunbathers, the kisses of toothless elderly Kazakh couples, the penetrative mouths of hyenas as they disembowel fleeing prey, the longing eyes of Akita dogs, the sweaty waists of African female dancers, the heaving chests of death-row inmates on the execution gurney, the tight jaws of some vindictive men.

Abdul Adan was born in Somalia, grew up in Kenya and lives in the United States. His work has appeared in *Kwani?*, *African-Writing*, *Storytime*, *African Roar*, *Gambit: Anthology of Newer African Writing*, and *Jungle Jim*. He is working on a collection of stories.