

For Rany

By Babette Gallard

“Pick a time. Pick a place.”

“What time? What place?”

“Anywhere you’d like to be right now.”

“Somewhere I’ve already been?”

“It’s up to you.”

Maybe it’s something to do with the greyness of the light; the monochrome before evening finally shifts into night. Or perhaps it’s just because this is the only time of the day when they can be alone together, but they always start talking at about this time.

Talking is easier when no one else is around, but the house always seems to be full of people. He’s never had so many friends.

People dropping by to say “Hi, how are you doing, Chris? You’re looking good.”

People who whisper in the next room that it’s a shame for someone so young. People he hardly knew before.

The nurse, even though there’s nothing left for her to do, because Kate has been doing it for weeks; the patting and the pulling and the draining and the wiping. Dealing with the most private parts of him and stripping away any pretence or dignity. They’ve each accepted it now, but he remembers when it wasn’t so easy.

“I can do it myself. Anyway, you hate me because you don’t know how,”

“The nurse showed me how, Chris. Try thinking of a place, just *one* place, and describe it.”

“Can I take you with me?”

“If you want to, but it’s your dream, and I won’t be hurt if you stay there alone.”

It used to hurt. At the beginning, when Chris didn’t know what it was, it hurt even more. When he felt the pain building up, he used to pretend he was sneaking out for a smoke, even though he’d given up years ago.

Kate got upset, and they argued, but arguing was easier than talking about how it felt to be pissing broken glass.

“Why start smoking now?” she used to shout at him. “After all this time, and when you’re playing rugby every weekend and doing all that circuit training? It’s crazy. No, it’s worse than

that, it's just bloody stupid. Do you want me to remind you of the way my sister died? Is that the way you want to go too?

When the results came through, he'd shouted at her as if she was to blame for what the doctor had just told them.

"I know I've been selfish, and I've got a long list of apologies to make, but am I that bad? Can anyone be bad enough to serve this?"

She'd kissed him then, her lips hot and uncertain, whispering that only people who believed in the diving being could believe in divine retribution. So that was that. He didn't believe in a god, so he could only put it down to bastard bad luck.

When he told his parents, his Mum said it was the food they ate, the water they drank, and the air they breathed. Then she'd started crying, a kitten sound moaned into her hands with his Dad collapsed around her so that together they reminded him of a Rodin sculpture.

"Have you thought about anything yet?"

Her face is in shadow, but a sliver of light is highlighting the soft hairs on her chin. He tries to imagine her older, the hairs hardened to pert bristles that she'll pluck out covertly like his mum.

"I've got them on my nipples too," She told him when he'd caught her in the bathroom once. "It comes with age. Men get balder, and we get hairier. A design fault. One of many."

He'd felt sorry for her then and noticed for the first time that she'd stopped wearing makeup and painting her nails.

Kate's hands aren't like his mum's. They are rough and gritty. It's what he'd liked about her from the start. Her difference. He looks at her again, and it's as if, with the darkening of the room, a light is going on in his head.

"I'm thinking back."

The street lights have come on, slicing the room into slabs of black and white and turning his tears into silver trails that run down the sides of his eyes and into his hair.

"Listen to me, Kate. Tell me you understand. I can't get up. I can't pee, and when I do, it's blood. I have every minute of every day. I want it to stop, but then I don't, because it will be forever."

"No, only we can be forever. You said you were thinking back. Paint the picture for me."

He feels her body moving over his skin as she checks the tubes and monitors his temperature with his lips. Does she regret that everything she has learnt will be wasted? Will she sculpt emaciated bodies and death when it's all over? He doesn't want to ask. His hand is clammy, and the sweat dribbling off his top lip is bitton on his tongue.

"How can I paint a smell? The smell of warm bodies in the sun."

"Where are you?"

"On a beach. We went one summer, I think it was Spain. I'm lying in Mum, her belly soft and her tits are falling out of the sides of her costume. Dad's smiling, and I can see the leftover chocolate ice cream stuck on the front tooth, which is whiter than the rest. It's a crown, but I didn't know that then."

"How old are you?"

"Nine, maybe ten. I don't know why, but lying on Mum's belly has given me a hard-on, and I'm embarrassed."

Then Mum says, "Keep that for other women, young man."

And Dad says, "Son, there's a name for that kind of thing."

I ask him what it is, but he just laughs, and then we all laugh. That's what I remember most, the laughing.

"Is that your place?"

"Getting there."

He has closed his eyes, but he sees and feels and smells it all as if he were there right now, outside in the cold air. November and his feet are freezing. He's walked through the blue door, which is metal with reinforced glass windows. Institutional. Ugly.

"Don't leave me alone," Kate says. "Tell me what you're seeing." Her eyes are searching his as if the picture was in the black pupils.

"Not seeing, smelling. Why is it that smell always comes first?"

It's our most primordial sense, the one that saved us from mammoths and sabre-toothed tigers."

"But it's not just a smell, it's more a dampness in the air, the sort that seeps in through brick. You were wearing those fingerless gloves that first time, and when you shook my hand, it felt like holding icicles.

"The pipes had blown that morning. Don't remember me telling you?"

“I’d come to look at the studios to get an idea of what was needed for the renovation project. My first job.”

“You hadn’t got a clue.”

“You said so.”

“Did I?”

“The clay was everywhere, in bags, in lumps, in streaks across the wall. You told me your day job was teaching disturbed teenagers, and you showed me some of their work. Gross, twisted, filthy stuff, but I tried to say the right things. Then you showed me the drawings of what you thought the centre should look like and I felt like packing up and going home because they were better than anything I could have done.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

There’s a lot he hasn’t told her, because before he’d always thought it could wait and now he doesn’t want to. A tremor flickers in the fingers of his hand cupped around her warm breast, inside the t-shirt that’s still got paint on the sleeve from when they decorated the kitchen; a bright red scuff matching the wall he can see through the half-open door.

“I’m in the place,” he says.

“Where?”

“Next to the kiln and the shelves where you kept the stuff made by your students. I’m standing in front of the cupboard, the one with the glass door.”

“Where I kept my own work?”

“Yeah, the bronze casts of your clay figures. Do you remember how I recognised one of them?”

“Tell me.”

He smiles because they both know the words, but she wants to hear him say them.

“Me: Did you do that?”

You: Yes, it’s what I do.

Me: But that’s our trophy.

You: Do you play for the Exiles?

Me: I’m the captain. We won it this year.

You: and I made it.”

Now he sees the bronze figure again. A rugby player caught in mid-flight, the power of a young, muscular man in shorts.

He has the feeling still, burning through him just as it did when he ran for the line. The thrill and pain held like a nut within the core of the metal, bursting for the leap and bunching on the fall. Rocks on rocks.

“Lie still,” she says. “I’ll be back.”

A car slows down to park outside in the street below. Two doors open and close. A man coughs. Probably the new couple from downstairs. Cindy Briars is walking her dog in her too-high heels, just as she will tomorrow and the day after that, until one day she won’t anymore, but there will always be a car door slamming and a woman walking her dog, tip-tapping for someone else to hear.

He calls out, “Will you keep my jacket, Kate? The leather one. Will you wear it?”

“Yes, and I’ll sleep in your t-shirts.”

She comes back in and turns on the small table lamp in the corner. It emits an orange glow that makes the sickly yellow of his arms seem sulphurous. They are soft and hairless, and the flesh hangs on his body as if it should belong to someone much larger.

“I don’t want you to remember me like this.”

But she will remember everything. Her eyes are bright as she closes his fingers around the bronze figure, curling his palm so that he can feel the tension of the muscles again, the jumping before the falling. Rock on rock. Then a small twist of pain as the needle pierces his skin.

“You’ll sleep,” she whispers, her breath warm on his cheek and her body taking the shape of his own where she lies beside him. “Then it will be dawn.”

“And what will you do?”

“I’ll get up and wear your jacket and smell your smell and carry you in the palm of my hand.”

“And I’ll be there forever.”