

Acknowledgement

Gasping For Air is a fictional story that references many real artworks, books, films and musical releases. I have sincere gratitude and respect for all these inspirational works' creators, and I urge readers to seek them out if they're not already familiar with them. One work that deserves special mention is Laura Miller's *The Magician's Book*, an insightful and thorough critique of *The Chronicles of Narnia* by CS Lewis. Though the central characters in this novel would have loved it, it was unfortunately published after the events described here.

In writing *Gasping For Air*, I have also been inspired by Paganism, including the practices and teachings of modern Druidry. Whilst I do not directly represent any one tradition in this story, I thank the Order of Bards Ovates and Druids specifically. More widely, I also value our modern liberal society, which upholds our freedom to explore and express our spirituality and our sexuality in our own our chosen way, "If it harm none..."

The cover photograph for the free-ebooks.net release is Sergey Gorshkov's 'Arctic Treasure' - a Wildlife Photographer of the Year highly commended entry.

Chapter 1

Ben found that the gym quiet on weekday afternoons, especially so on a Monday. There was just one other person in the upstairs room of cardio machines, a short woman with dark hair who he'd seen before. She jogged steadily, the whir of her machine louder than the gym's background music. He chose a machine of his own, leaving an unoccupied space between them, then started building up to his own pace. He stared into space as he pounded along beside the woman, and perhaps she too was looking into the clear spring sky ahead of them. The blue rectangle and a few treetops were all that was visible through the narrow window, too high to let them see the old graveyard at the back of the gym.

Ben had not exercised for nearly a week, as he'd had a load of timber to process in his workshop. He noticed that his routine seemed a little harder than usual, but less than ten minutes in, he really ran into difficulties. His heavy breathing was becoming difficult, almost painful as he struggled to get enough air. This seemed to affect his technique as he misjudged the placement of his feet and stumbled. He quickly stopped the machine, stepping off it to lean against the wall by the window, but his breath wasn't coming any easier. He was aware of his heart still hammering in his chest as he slid down the wall onto his haunches. Then he felt the room tipping and realised with distant surprise that he'd actually slid all the way down onto the floor.

He heard his companion's running machine stop and saw her trainers briskly stepping towards him. From his ground-level point of view, it seemed as if a giant were approaching. She must have crouched down, as he could see she was balancing on the balls of her feet. She had asked if he was feeling okay he realised, and he tried to answer, to say that he wasn't sure. Though he was still labouring for breath, he felt calmer now. Then he heard her mutter a curse and call out, "Some help here, please!" She cursed again when no one came, then she was grasping his limbs, trying to manoeuvre his limp body to stretch him out on his side. He was a bit alarmed when he unexpectedly felt her fingers in his mouth too, but whatever she was trying to do, it only took a moment.

Ben felt himself drifting into sleep now, but came to his senses when he realised the woman was trying to get his attention, snapping her fingers in front of his face. "Hey! Stay with me. What's your name?"

He answered with a wheeze, "Ben, Ben Osborne."

"That's good, Ben," she said, then she seemed to speak to someone else, "It's Ben Osborne. I'm not sure I'll get much more from him right now. Thanks, that's good to know. I've put him in the recovery position and checked his airways. That's about the limit of my first aid. Yes, his lips are blue. I can stay with him until they arrive. Okay, I won't hang up then."

Then she seemed to be addressing him again in a slow clear voice, in quite a posh accent, Ben thought vaguely. "Okay, Ben. I'm Marcie. You sit tight. I've called an ambulance and they're on their way. I'm going to stay with you. They want me to keep an eye on that breathing. You're doing very well." He realised that she was gripping his hand, and he felt comforted by that, but he did still feel very sleepy.

Suddenly there were other people bustling around in the room. Then there was the pressure of cool plastic on his face and a hiss of gas. Someone was reaching behind his head, strapping the plastic mask over his nose and mouth, but he was becoming more aware of a delicious lightheaded feeling, creeping up the back of his neck from his chest to his scalp. His breath was coming more easily again, and he felt a buoyant relief from the pain in his chest, which only a moment ago he'd somehow barely noticed. He deliberately drew a slow deep breath, gratefully savouring the sweetly easing comfort that it brought. A tingle of satisfaction shivered right through his body, sensuously arousing in its intensity. He was aware that someone was putting their hand in the pockets of his gym shorts. He considered protesting - they might be trying to take his locker key - but it didn't seem to really matter.

A stout balding man in green was suddenly looming over his face. "Alright Ben, me and my mate are going to lift you onto the stretcher now. Then we'll give you a ride into the RVI, okay?" He felt himself being raised up by strong hands under his armpits and thighs, then he was being tucked tightly into a pleasantly cosy blanket. He realised he'd lost her hand and felt confused. He'd been holding hands with the small woman who had been running with him. He remembered she had glasses and dark wavy hair tied back in a tight bun, and she was called Marcie.

He tried to say her name under the muffling mask, raising his hand hopefully even as the paramedic fussed around with thick fingers on Ben's eyelids and neck. He felt her small hand touch his, and he gripped it gratefully.

"It's alright, pet, you can ride with us," he heard the man say above his head.

"But I..." she started, before being cut off.

"It's no bother. You bring his bag. We'll move him down to the van now. He's looking a bit less peaky already, but we don't want to hang about with something like this."

Ben felt himself being lifted again, then had the confused impression of gliding under the gym's lights, down the stairs, out into the cold air, then into a crowded little room that he realised was the back of an ambulance. It started swaying and he heard a siren. He hoped there hadn't been an accident that would hold them up, then realised that it was their vehicle that was making the noise. He felt foolish at his mistake, and at the trouble he'd put people to.

He was still gripping someone's hand. He rolled his head to see the small woman from the gym sitting anxiously beside him, squashed onto a tiny chair beside the older paramedic. "Hey," she said, "You're going to be all right, okay?" He tried to smile beneath the hissing gas. It was all he could manage, but he certainly felt all right.

Then they were briefly out in the cold air again, before Ben found himself floating under more ceiling lights. There was noise and activity all around. He was aware of people talking to each other over his prone body. But soon all this subsided as he came to rest in a calm space surrounded by pale blue curtains.

As the drama receded, he felt himself relax, lying back on the bed that they'd left him in, resting his head on the clean pillow. He still wore the mask, but he felt his breath was

coming much more easily now, and he also felt he was becoming more alert, more aware of his surroundings. He suddenly realised that he was not alone, that the woman from the gym was still with him, and more than that, still holding his hand.

He looked at her. She seemed small and perhaps a little scared, still dressed in her tight gym kit, hunched forwards in the chair that she'd drawn close to his bedside, staring at his big rough hand as it enveloped hers. Somehow he'd literally pulled her into this crisis with him, even though she was a complete stranger. Yet somehow he also felt they had made a connection, that fate had thrown them together, and now they could never be strangers again.

He relaxed his grip, feeling their sticky hands come apart. "I'm sorry, Marcie, isn't it?" His voice was muffled by the mask, but she could obviously hear him well enough, as she startled and looked straight at him with her brown eyes, blinking her long dark lashes under her heavy eyebrows. She asked if he was feeling better.

"Aye, thank you. Still a bit lightheaded, but I feel more with it now," then he repeated, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to drag you into this. I don't even know what happened."

"Hey, relax, okay? You fainted or something, and I was there to help," she said, leaning back in her chair now, perhaps taking her own advice. "The gym found your details, eventually, but they didn't have your next of kin noted. I've called in myself now. My boss was fine with me taking the rest of the afternoon off. I can stick around a bit longer if you like."

"Thank you. I would like that. It really is kind of you."

At that moment the curtain around Ben's bed was pulled aside with a dramatic noise. A tired-looking woman in a smart skirt and blouse stepped in, followed by a man in hospital uniform. "Ah, Ben Osborne isn't it? You're looking brighter. I'm Doctor Sally Norman, and I've been handling your case. I'll just adjust your oxygen, if I may. You probably don't need it so rich now you're back with us. Are you okay to talk?"

Ben agreed, and she went on briskly, "Your friend has been very helpful in describing what happened at the gym, but she didn't seem to know the details of your personal health history. Didn't you have your blue inhaler with you at the gym?"

Ben confessed he didn't know what she meant, so she explained with seemingly strained patience, "It seems you had a severe asthma attack. You're not getting any treatment for asthma? But it has been diagnosed? No? Really? Well, you'll need tests, but that's certainly what it looks like. We'll get a chest x-ray too. This man will take you down there. But can I ask, are you a smoker? Good. And what's your line of work?"

Ben explained that he was a tree surgeon, but he also worked with a lot of the timber he felled for the carpentry and joinery trade. That seemed to give the doctor an idea. "Ah, wood dust," she said, "Exposed to it a lot, would you say? And any allergies? Well, maybe we need to test that too. If I remember, some species are serious triggers. And there are mould spores and what-not. I'll refer you to a specialist, but it could be that long term exposure has tipped you over the edge."

Ben told her that he'd been spending the last few days sawing an especially large intake of cedar for timber. "Ah-ha! We may have found your smoking gun," Doctor Norman concluded. "Well, we'd like to keep you in tonight, if your friend doesn't mind picking up your things from home. It looks like you're out of the woods, so to speak, but it's best you're kept under observation, and kept topped up with oxygen for the time being too. I'll see you again in half an hour or so when we have your x-rays, then we'll see about moving you onto the ward. All right?"

The doctor was already moving on, but the hospital orderly seemed in less of a rush. "Are you coming down to radiology with me, pet? You can keep your man company."

"He's not..." Marcie began, but then gave up, finishing simply, "Thank you."

"Hoy your bags down there and we'll be off then."

Ben saw Marcie pick up his rucksack that she must have brought from the gym and what he guessed was her sports bag too. She squatted down beside him to stow them under the bed as he lay there, whilst the orderly pulled back the curtains right back. Then he was gliding through the hospital again. He vaguely recognised the scenes and the whirl of activity as they passed, but with much more awareness now than when he'd first arrived. He was feeling less spaced out now too, and wondered if that was something to do with the doctor's adjustment of his oxygen supply. Again he felt guilty at the trouble he was putting people to when there were so many other people who were really sick.

The orderly left them in a corridor beside a blank door under an industrial warning light. "Are you doing okay?" he heard Marcie ask. She must have been sat at a chair behind his head, out of his line of sight.

"To be honest, I'm a bit scared," he found himself confessing. "That doctor, if I understood, she said I might have had a reaction to sawdust. If that's a risk for me now, it means I can't work. And I don't want to be a sick person, staying in hospital."

"Hey, don't worry about that, right? They just like to be sure. Once you're here they want to keep an eye on you, like she said. And don't worry about the future now. Let's just think of the next step. Is there someone I can call for you to come round now?"

"Erm, no, I can't think of anyone as it happens," Ben puzzled. "My dad can't come up from Lincolnshire and my brother's away. I can't think my workmates would be that bothered. Nor my other mates."

"I was thinking of someone more like a wife or girlfriend or whatever," he heard Marcie explain with perhaps strained patience.

"Oh, erm, no. I can't ask her. We've only just started dating, really. I've not known her that long. I've only seen her a few times like that, as her boyfriend I mean."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to pry," Marcie replied, then sighed, "Well, I can get your stuff, like the doctor asked, if you like."

"Oh no, I can't ask you to do that! I've already messed you around too much."

He felt Marcie's hand on his shoulder, her grip reassuring him. "Hey, it's not a problem. I said I can stick around. You're my good deed for the day. You live near the gym, right?"

"Aye, in Shieldfield. I rent a flat from the Trust above the workshop. But really, I can't ask you to run around for me."

"Okay, look. There's a custom, you know, in some places. If I offer you something and I mean it, I ask three times. It's polite of you to decline twice, but on the third time you say yes. You know I'm sincere, and I know you're not taking advantage of my better nature. So, for the third time, do you want me to pop round to your flat, pack an overnight bag for you, then bring it in to you on the ward?"

"Aye, yes please," Ben simply stated, feeling relieved that she might visit him again before his night in the hospital.

"Okay. Good. Now, I know we don't know each other, and maybe you don't trust me. But if I take your keys, I'll leave you something of mine. It's not much, but it's precious to me." Marcie had withdrawn her hand. Now she was pressing something back into his hand. He raised it to his face. It was a pendant, a kind of silver cross on a matching chain, warm on his fingertips as if she had been wearing it against her skin.

"I'll keep it safe," he said, examining it closely. The cross had equal arms with notches in their wide ends. He guessed it must be significant of something, but he couldn't think what.

Just then, the door they'd been waiting at burst open and two people in heavy hospital aprons stepped out. "Mr Osborne?" the older man said, reading from the notes he was holding. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Suspected pneumoconiosis, I see. We'll take an x-ray of your chest now, okay? I'm glad to see you've read the sign and started taking your jewellery off. Out running, were you? The forecast looked good for it this morning. Are you okay waiting here, ma'am? We won't need him for long."

Then he was being wheeled into a darkened room and the medical staff were busy around him, the man chattering as he worked quickly. "Pop your necklace in this tray. Do you have anything else with metal? We'll need to lift your shirt off too. Are you okay sitting up? I'll just unstrap the mask, if you can hold it over your mouth. That's great. Now just lower it a moment and breathe normally while we get this off. There we go, that's all untangled. Hold the mask up again and breathe in. Now we need to move you to this bed for the machine. Can you stand up by yourself do you think? That's great, take it steady. We've got you. Excuse the cold hands. Well done, now lie back. That's great. Hold the mask a moment longer while we get set up. Now let me take that off you and just breathe slowly for a moment."

Ben was on his back again, his bare skin against a rough paper sheet. He felt the cold firm plastic of the bed pressing through it as the x-ray machine hung over him. He was glad to find that he could breathe easily without the mask and its oxygen. Then there was a clunking noise and then the staff were back.

"Well done. We got a nice clear image. Hold the mask again please, and breathe normally. Are you ready to sit up? Great, let's pop your t-shirt back on. It's awkward with this pipe,

isn't it? At least you're not on the IV too. There we go. Shall I pop your necklace on for you too? That's it, easier for me to do than you. Now I'll put the mask's straps back on then you can lie back again. We won't keep your wife waiting any longer."

Ben interrupted, "She's not my wife," but if the radiographer heard, he didn't comment.

"There we go, ma'am, safe and sound. I'll call for a porter, and you should be back with the A&E team in just a moment. I'm sure you'll get well soon, young man!"

"I see you put my necklace on," Marcie said as she stood over Ben, once they were alone again, "Does that mean I can have the keys to your flat now?"

"I'm sorry. The x-ray man, he put it on me."

"I'm teasing! You'll keep it safe there. It was a gift from my grandmother, you know. Now, I heard your address read out. Let's check I got it right."

She'd been rummaging in her bag under Ben's bed, to find a pen and paper he guessed, when another orderly appeared. "Excuse me. Patient for A&E, yes?" he asked brusquely.

Ben soon found himself back in what seemed to be the same cubicle he'd been in before. The orderly closed the curtains on them and left.

"This is absurd," Ben said. "I'm sure I can stand up and walk about. I'm not sure I even need this mask anymore. I had it off when they took my x-ray."

"Hey, you be a good patient, okay? Patience is the word. Now let me get your address, and you can tell me how to get there. You'd better talk me through how to find what you need too."

With her pen and what seemed to be a small Filofax in her hand, Ben explained things to Marcie in short bursts. He was embarrassed about describing where she might find his clean t-shirts and underwear, but she coaxed it all out of him. He realised he was becoming increasingly happy and confident in opening up to her, responding to her practical competence. She thought of the toothbrush and toiletries that he'd need too, then she asked, "And pyjamas?"

"Erm, I don't wear any," Ben confessed.

"Well that won't do in hospital," she said decisively, looking straight at him. "You'll just have to wear your boxer shorts and a t-shirt. I'll bring extras."

They both startled when the curtain was pulled back loudly again, letting Doctor Norman enter the cubicle with a male nurse. "Ben and, I'm sorry, what was your name?"

Marcie answered before the doctor went on, speaking quickly. "I'm glad you're still here to hear this too. I've had a look at your x-ray, Ben, and I'm sorry to say that it might not be simple asthma. It's not too serious, don't worry, definitely nothing like cancer. But there are indicators of something called pneumoconiosis on your lungs. We see it more in miners, ship workers and so on. It is an occupational hazard of working with mineral dust especially, but your sawmill is definitely a risky environment too. You're unlucky to have

got it so young, but on the other hand it's lucky that we caught it early. I'll make sure you're referred to a consultant, but I'm afraid you may need to spend some time off your work, especially if there's also an allergic reaction that's developed to trigger the asthma. It is one of those things that doesn't just go away again, I'm sorry to say. But you're already doing the right thing by not smoking, and you're still young. I don't want to give you false hopes, but I think if you avoid the problematic dust, you should find you adapt and get fit again in time."

Ben found he was speechless, and was suddenly acutely aware of his breath, taking in the hissing artificial gas. Would this be his future? When Marcie gripped his hand, he realised he'd involuntarily reached out for her to hold it again.

"Thank you for your candour, doctor," Marcie spoke up, perhaps nervously filling the silence, "It's a lot to take in, I guess. Does that mean Ben will need to stay in hospital longer?" Ben was grateful that she'd asked exactly the right question, thinking just of the next step for now.

"No, I don't think so. It will be for the ward doctor to decide, but I expect if you have a good night, we'll be very happy to send you home. You can get a sick note for your employer from us before you leave, and we'll write a letter to your GP. Make an appointment with them, and they can set you up with routine asthma treatment. If you take it easy, everyday activities should be no problem at all. But for the next few weeks at least, don't do anything too strenuous. Avoid activities that might elevate your heart rate or leave you panting. The consultant should advise you on a gentle fitness regime to build up your strength up again slowly. Now, if it's okay, I'd like you to sit up and we can see how you're breathing without that mask."

Marcie dropped Ben's hand, then the nurse held Ben's elbow as he swung around onto the edge of the bed. Doctor Norman stepped forward to lift the straps over Ben's head and to take the oxygen mask away. "Just breathe normally, if you can," she instructed. Ben was glad that his breath seemed to be coming easily, despite his anxiety. "Good. Let me listen to your chest if I may," the doctor said, putting her stethoscope in her ears.

Ben noticed Marcie look away as he raised his t-shirt, gathering the fabric under his armpits, but then perhaps she thought twice about the false pretence of modesty. She looked up into his eyes and seemed to smile encouragingly whilst the doctor placed the cool stethoscope in different positions all around his bare chest.

"Very good," the doctor finally announced. "There are definitely spots that sound a bit ragged, but overall you seem to have bounced back very well. I can't hear significant residual constriction from the asthma. We'll keep you on the oxygen while you're here, but I'm going to recommend we just put a little pipe under your nose. Nurse, could you find a cannula for Mister Osborne before we move him, please? Drop it back to one litre per minute now. He'll be fine going up to the ward in a chair too. You can slip the mask back on for now." As the nurse helped Ben back into the oxygen mask, Doctor Norman added, "By the way, I hadn't noticed your pendant before. It's very nice. Do you have a connection to Malta?"

Ben wasn't sure what the doctor meant, and was glad when Marcie spoke up as the nurse helped him to lie back again, "It's my family, actually. My parents were both born there."

"Ah, of course. Well, I hope it brings you good luck, Ben. As I say, take it easy, and I'm sure you'll feel fit and healthy again before too long. I'll discharge you from A&E now, so all the best."

"And I'll just get that oxygen pipe for you, Ben, then we'll get you onto the ward," the nurse added as both of them left.

"I'm sorry, that didn't sound like good news," Marcie said, drawing her chair close to Ben's bedside again.

"It's quite a lot to take in. But I'm sorry too. People keep thinking we're a couple. And it's my fault that you're here at all."

"Stop fussing! I said I'm happy to help." Marcie hesitated, then went on, "Does it bother you that they think we're a couple? Would you rather I hadn't been here for all that?"

"No," Ben replied earnestly, then realised how sincerely he meant it, how it actually made him very happy to imagine Marcie as his girlfriend. She was quite different from his usual partners, less glamorous in a way, smaller and darker, more intellectual perhaps. But she had shown such self-assurance and kindness throughout his sudden crisis, throwing herself in wholeheartedly to support him. He thought of Jo, with whom he had a date coming up, after the night they'd spent together just last week. She was blonde, graceful, fun-loving and proud of her own dazzling beauty. But he couldn't picture her here, now.

He touched Marcie's cross through the fabric of his t-shirt, pressing it into his chest, thinking of the insight into its significance and how that made Marcie seem somehow exotic. He had thought that he was just wearing her necklace as a kind of insurance for her access to his flat, but perhaps she'd offered a part of herself to him already as well, giving herself into his trust. These thoughts came to him an instant, before he went on with his answer, "No, I am very glad that you've kept me company."

He was aware that he'd dodged Marcie's other question. He couldn't think how he'd explain his feelings about the two of them as a couple, when really they were still strangers. She might be married herself, he realised, someone's mother even. But even as these thoughts arose, he somehow recognised that they couldn't be true. He felt sure they were both still in that fluid exploratory phase of their early adult lives. Well, his circumstances might have suddenly changed in that regard, he reflected ruefully.

Only a moment had passed while they'd sat in silence, perhaps each gathering their thoughts, before the nurse came back, pushing a heavy-looking wheelchair with a bundle of wrapped medical supplies on its seat. "Okay, we're all set. I'll just fit this canula. They can seem a bit of a nuisance at first, but you'll get used to it in no time. Then I'll move you up to Ward Thirty myself. Did Doctor Norman say you were popping out to get some things for Ben, pet? You'll find Thirty no trouble if come back through the main entrance. It will give you a chance to change out of your gym kit too, right? I bet you didn't expect you'd be hanging around a hospital in it all afternoon!"

“Yes, use the shower if you want,” Ben suddenly realised how selfish he’d been, not thinking of Marcie’s discomfort, “Take your time.”

“Aye,” the nurse agreed, “There’s no rush. Ward visiting runs to seven. And if you’re quiet, we’ll let you stay later. Grab yourself some scrans too. Are you off now then, pet?”

He’d asked this as Marcie had made a move to pull the bags out from under the bed. This had surprised Ben a little, but he couldn’t blame her for wanting to get move on. He just hoped he hadn’t caused any offence by mentioning the shower. He certainly didn’t want her to think that he’d thought she was dirty for sitting around in her gym clothes, but felt he couldn’t say anything more in front of the nurse.

“Are your keys in one of these pockets?” was all Marcie asked, holding up his bag. Ben tried to guide her, but she fell back on trial and error to find them, whilst the nurse took Ben’s mask off. Once she had the keys, she bundled Ben’s bag back up, then checked she had her Filofax in her own bag, before glancing at her watch. “I’ve got all I need now. I’ll leave your gym rucksack here, and I’ll definitely be back before six, okay?”

The nurse was fiddling with the oxygen lines around Ben’s face, but he tried to say as clearly and sincerely as he could, “Thank you. You’ve really been great. Honestly, I don’t know what I would...”

“Oh, shut up!” she interrupted with a wry smile. “You just sit tight and take it easy, and we’ll talk more about everything soon.”

Chapter 2

As she strode off, the nurse removed Ben's mask for the last time and fiddled with the pipe under his nose. "Sorry, that's probably a bit itchy for you. But try not to fuss at it, and I promise you won't even notice it by bedtime. Now, are you ready to move to the chair?"

Ben accepted the nurse's help to get up from the bed, whilst trying to ignore the pinching irritation in his nostrils, but he felt that he could have managed fine on his own. The practical man gathered Ben's gym bag up and put it on his knee, then busied himself with tidying the pipes and rubbish away. It wasn't long before he'd finished and got behind the wheelchair to set off for the ward. As he pushed them along the maze-like corridors to a lift, he chatted lightly behind Ben's head.

"She seems like a good lass, your hinny," he observed.

"We're not..." Ben began.

"Not married yet? Fiancé then?"

"No, erm," Ben stuttered.

"Maybe it's time to pop the question then. I've seen a few that propose at their bedside, like. It's a test for a couple, getting yourself laid out here. You get to see your other half's true qualities, so to speak. And I'd say yours are solid gold. You're a lucky man. Not that it's my business, mind."

Ben had felt a bit affronted by the man's presumption, but he appreciated all that he'd said, accepting the man's honesty in sharing his idle thoughts. It must have seemed plain to him, seeing Ben with Marcie. And Ben knew the man was just trying to be friendly.

"It's given me a lot to think about, today," he replied vaguely as the nurse wheeled him from the lift into a large hall-like room. Ben realised that this was the ward. The old hospital's grand structure was clear behind all the modern equipment cluttered around the beds' bays, with utilitarian blinds half-closed in tall windows.

"Aye, well you're in the right place now," the nurse said as they approached a reception desk, "You take it easy and give yourself time. Gan canny, now."

The male nurse shifted his attention to an older female counterpart. They had a quick conversation in a low tone, then she took over with a cheery greeting, pushing Ben to a booth in the long room of beds, some hidden by curtains. She let him stand up for himself to get into the chair beside the bed, fiddled with his tubes, then promised the ward doctor would see him soon as she pushed the chair away.

After being left alone to his thoughts for a while, a young male doctor did turn up to review his case. He spoke to Ben in more detail about the asthma and the pneumoconiosis, and about the next steps for a GP appointment and a specialist consultation. As they spoke, it dawned on Ben just how serious his situation had been. If the ambulance hadn't come

promptly, there had been a very real possibility that he would have died right there in the gym. Marcie had quite literally saved his life.

The doctor gave Ben permission to take himself to the bathroom on his own, told him that a meal would be brought to his bedside at around six, and concluded by saying that he'd see him again on his evening rounds. Then Ben was left on his own again.

He thought he'd better call his dad to let him know what had happened. He got his mobile out guiltily, not sure if he was allowed to use it on the ward having passed signs on the walls, but no one seemed too bothered. Of course once he got through to his dad, the old man was worried and wanted to come straight up. He said he could leave the farm to "the lads", but Ben knew that he didn't like trusting everything to the hired labourers, so he insisted he stay put. His dad asked if there was anyone looking after him, and Ben found himself talking about Marcie. He did not mention that he hadn't even known her before he'd collapsed. "Well, make sure she's got my number, and tell her not to be shy if she needs to call," his dad told him before they rang off.

Then, with an awkward guilty apprehension, Ben thought he'd better call Jo too, to explain what had happened and to cancel their upcoming date. When she answered, she seemed rather uninterested in his collapse at the gym. "So if we're not going out on Thursday, do you want to keep it going at all?" she asked.

"How do you mean?" he asked.

"Well, we've only just started, as a couple I mean. If you can't make this weekend, I could see someone else. Should we call it a day and say we're singles again?"

"Okay, I guess that makes sense," Ben found himself saying. He felt surprised and a little hurt at how fast Jo's thoughts had moved on, but he could see her logic. There was no reason for her to stop having fun because he was unwell, and if they made a clean break of it now, she'd be free of any doubts or guilt when she met someone else that she fancied.

"Thanks for understanding, Ben. We had fun, right? Maybe we'll see each other around again, sometime when you're feeling better. You take care now."

And with that, they were saying goodbye, perhaps for the last time, Ben thought sadly. But at that moment he heard a familiar voice from the desk at the end of the ward. Marcie had returned already, and found where he was.

He raised his hand to wave as she walked down the ward with what he recognised as one of his old sports bags. She'd changed into a loose blouse with a flower print, tucked into dark, baggy high waisted trousers, and she was still carrying her own gym bag as well, he noticed. He also couldn't help himself from noticing how her outfit emphasised her short hourglass figure. "Hiya," he said meekly, "You came back quickly."

"I got my car," she explained as she dropped the bags and found a chair to pull up by his. "It's only a mile or so from here to my flat, in Jesmond, and about the same again to yours, but it seemed sensible to drive, despite the traffic. They've got a car park here. And I could

park right in front of those big doors at your place, next to your pickup, if that's what you call it. I didn't know there were old buildings like that in Byker."

"It's more Shieldfield than Byker," he corrected her without thinking, "Or Ouseburn maybe, like my name. But yes, it's an interesting place. It was a stables and coach house. I guess there's an old Armstrong family connection. I rent it from the Armstrong Trust, who I work for, you see. Worked for, I guess."

"Hey, don't worry about that yet. I'm sure they'll understand. Just start by phoning in sick tomorrow and take it from there. But I found your stuff okay, and thank you for saying I could use your shower."

"It's nothing, after all you've done for me. I'm sorry if you found it a bit of a mess in there," Ben said guiltily. Yet at some level, he realised his imagination had also been stimulated by the thought of Marcie undressing and getting under the shower in his flat.

"I've seen worse," she replied dismissively, "And I bet you hadn't left your flat this morning thinking that a strange woman would be turning up to go through your things! But look, Ben, when I was there I noticed something that could be serious."

He asked what she meant, and she explained, "Your rooms, they're just above your workshop, right? I didn't go into the space downstairs at all, but as soon as I walked into your flat I could smell the sawdust. The dust on your furniture was thick, and I bet it's from your timber cutting. I shook this bag when I found it, and clouds of dust came off it then too. It's no wonder your lungs are struggling. You're breathing that stuff in twenty-four hours a day!"

Ben was about protest, to defend himself by saying that the last week had been especially heavy, but he knew she was right. "What can I do?" he asked weakly.

"Is there somewhere else you can stay? You mentioned a girlfriend, right?"

"Erm, ex-girlfriend at it happens. I just spoke to her, and she wanted us to separate."

"What, just like that? You told her where you were? Didn't she want to come in to see you at least?"

"No. I can see it from her side, though. We've not been together long, and there's no reason why she should change her lifestyle, because of what's happened to me."

"I'm sorry, and I'd normally stick up for the sisterhood, but what a bitch! Oh, you poor thing. On top of the news you'd just got from the doctor. Dumping you just like that. The selfish little madam!"

"It's no big deal," Ben found himself saying. "I'm more worried about going back to the flat now, with all that dust, like you said."

"Hey, look. I've got a spare room. It's not a big place, just one of those box rooms that you get in a Tyneside flat, you know? There's a lot of books in there right now, and they might be a bit dusty, but I can Hoover. Also it would just be a camp bed, I'm afraid, but it would be

clean. Why don't you stop over with me when you're discharged, until you can sort things with your work and the flat?"

"Oh, no Marcie, I couldn't ask that of you. You've already wasted your day on me. I can't intrude any more."

"Let's not do this again. You didn't ask, I offered. You just need to say yes."

"This is really very generous of you, but surely you have a husband or a boyfriend? They wouldn't want you to invite a strange man back to your flat."

Marcie sighed. "I'll be honest with you, Ben. There is someone. Well, I don't know if you'd call him a boyfriend. He's married you see, to someone else. I guess that makes me his mistress, if we're speaking plainly. But our relationship, it's like being in a slow-motion car crash. The way it is now, I really couldn't care less if he gets jealous when I invite a friend over to sleep in my spare room. And this isn't about me anyway, it's about you. Do you want a bed at my place for tomorrow night that's dust-free? This is the third time I've asked, and you remember the deal?"

"Okay then, thank you. Thank you for offering and thank you for being honest. I would be very grateful for a clean space, somewhere to flop when I get out of here."

"That's settled then. And it looks like they're bringing food around now!" Ben had noticed the noise and the smells that reminded him of school dinners. Even though he had doubts about what they might be serving, he realised he was ravenously hungry. When the orderlies came to his bed, he eagerly accepted the pie and vegetables that were offered. They arranged things on his table in a business-like way, apologising to Marcie that they didn't have any for visitors, then left them in peace.

As he tucked in, Ben remembered something else. "Erm, I forgot. I've still got your necklace," he said around a mouthful of food. "You mustn't leave without it."

"Yes, there was a funny coincidence about that," she said vaguely, before explaining, "Do you remember me saying it was from Malta? And did I say it was actually a gift from my grandmother, my father's mother, my Nanna, as we call her? Well, I was in your flat when my mobile phone rang, and it was her. I only usually speak to her at the weekend, but she said that she'd been thinking of me and she hoped that I was okay. I reassured her I was, but I'd just had to take a friend into hospital. She wanted to know all about you, of course, but I had to tell her we'd only just met. Well, she said she'd just come back from the church, where she'd lit a candle for me and made a prayer for my happiness. She told me to touch the necklace, to feel the 'talba' for you too, and I had to admit that I'd actually just left her pendant with you. Now I'm not a practising Roman Catholic myself at all, you understand, but I sometimes wonder about the power of superstition. It seemed very odd that she'd thought of me just then, but kind of comforting too. And it was odd that she mentioned the necklace too, but she was very pleased to hear it was with you, helping you get better. I'm sorry, you don't need to listen to this nonsense."

Ben had nearly finished his meal already, but he'd been paying close attention, intrigued by this small insight into Marcie's life. "No, don't call it nonsense. I'm not religious myself

either, but it is comforting - comforting to have your Nanna's best wishes. Tell her I send them to her too. Is she well, for her age I mean?"

"Oh, she's okay. She's still with it, and usually bright and cheery when we speak. But I don't know if you've seen it, they kind of fade, don't they? It's as if they're already halfway to the other side, spending more time in the company of the dead than the living. Ha, listen to me! You must think I'm some kind of superstitious spiritualist myself, and I'm really not. I'm almost a proper scientist!"

"No, I know what you mean. But what is it you do then, for a living?"

"Well, I get paid for working at the university library, probably not more than five hundred yards from where we are right now. But what I'm trying to do is complete a PhD in information science."

"I don't know what that means," Ben confessed.

"Well, it used to be things like library catalogues, but now it's about organising things on the Web. Perhaps. There's a lot of very detailed stuff I wouldn't want to bore you with."

"No, I'm interested, but you'll have to keep it simple for me. I don't go to libraries much. I don't really understand what you mean by completing a PhD either. I thought you just got them by working at universities. I don't know anyone clever enough to have one, though."

"Oh, it's meant to be a big test that you spend three years or more getting ready for, just to prove you can do academic research. It means you can get better jobs at the university, as a lecturer or whatever. But I'm not sure you need to be that clever. It's more just stamina that you need to get through it."

"Well, I'm sure you're more than clever enough, and I've seen you've got stamina, in the gym, right?"

"Right," said Marcie, looking at him oddly, perhaps unsure of whether he was joking. "Can I ask, do you mind that I know your age, Ben? The woman at the gym found your date of birth in your records and read it out to the ambulance driver, then they read it out again when they checked you into A&E."

"And you remember? No, I don't mind. So you know if I'm older than you, right?"

"Actually you're a bit younger. You were born on the third of May 1977, right? So you're twenty-five. I was born in November 1975. I'm twenty-seven already."

"Wow, how did you remember that?" Ben asked, hoping he'd judged it right by trying to flatter her about being younger than she looked. She had seemed so mature, he was actually a little surprised that she wasn't even older.

"Let's say it's a librarian's information science training. But that's a precious bit of data, right? Benjamin Osborne's date of birth. It can let the whole of the NHS find every medical record they have about you. If the records haven't been lost, they can find your birth details, your inoculations, your childhood GP visits, your current prescriptions. And this trip to

hospital, your own GP can check tomorrow what's happened, or in fifty years' time, when you're an old man. And that's all getting so much easier and faster and more detailed with computers and the Internet."

"So information science makes that work?"

"See? You've got it already. And no one said you had to have a PhD to understand that."

"No one said I should go to university, when I was at school," he admitted.

"Hey, I've been bothering you way too much with all this stuff about my work. You must be tired."

"No, I've really enjoyed you telling me about it. I don't know anyone else who knows about stuff like this."

"And I don't know anyone else who knows how to bring down a tree safely and turn it into furniture. You'll have to show me what you've done. You work in Jesmond Dene, right? I'd not heard there was an Armstrong Trust. I assumed the council looked after it."

"Well, they do, mostly. The Trust isn't very big, and mainly helps the National Trust with Cragside, you know it? But they have an interest in conserving the Dene, down into Heaton Park too. I guess they'll need to look for someone else now."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring you back to that. I just thought we could go for walks together in the Dene, especially now that spring is coming."

"Yes, that would be nice."

"Okay, well hold onto that thought. And hold onto my Maltese charm for now too. Think of my Nanna's prayers to help you get better quickly. I'll stop by again in the morning to see when they're discharging you, then I can give you a lift back to my place when you need it. I'll leave my details with you too, just in case," she said, reaching into her own bag for her Filofax.

"I don't know how I can thank you enough, Marcie. It's meant a lot to me. All this, it would have been a million times harder without your help." Ben hesitated as Marcie wrote out her full name, address and telephone numbers for him, then he ploughed on with what he wanted to say, "And it means a lot to me too, that you told your Nanna I was your friend. I like the thought of us being friends, if that's okay."

"Of course it's okay," Marcie said with a laugh, putting her pen down to reach for his hand. "We were strangers when you walked into the gym this afternoon, but now we know each other quite well, right? And I think we're getting on together just fine."

Ben didn't go further, but he thought again of what the doctor had assumed and the nurse had said. He looked at Marcie's small hand in his big, calloused paw. Could this woman become his girlfriend, his soul partner? They were the complete opposites of each other in so many ways, but somehow they'd made a connection, which was only going to become stronger. He gripped her hand gently. "I think we are too," he lamely replied.

“Hey, it’s been a big day,” she said, jiggling his hand about with hers. “You’ve had to put up with an awful lot that I wouldn’t wish on anyone, especially not someone as kind and patient as you. But I was glad I could be here to help. No one really knows what’s going to happen tomorrow, right? But I’m glad that I will be able to help you then too, whatever your path is after that. And we can both be sure of looking forward to walks in the spring sunshine at least.”

“Thank you,” was all Ben could think to say, then he remembered what the young ward doctor had said earlier, “You saved my life, you know”.

“Oh, enough! All this, it’s just the least that a friend would do. Now, you get some restful sleep, and I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

With a final squeeze of his hand, she pulled away and they said goodnight to each other, Ben echoing her little wave awkwardly. It wasn’t how he would have liked to say goodbye to her. A cuddle and kiss would have been much more satisfying, but that was hardly practical with his tubes and his instruction to rest.

He watched her walking away, feeling guilty again for noticing how her bottom moved in her loose trousers. But then he thought that perhaps there was no harm in noticing some simple feelings of attraction towards her. They had got on well this evening, he hoped, and it now seemed as if there were fewer obstacles than he’d feared to them becoming more than friends. When Marcie had mentioned those paths that lay ahead, perhaps there was one that she could share with him. For now it was enough to know that the possibility was there, without rushing or forcing them down that course.

He looked down at the note she’d left. She’d written her full name formally, Marcella Tabone, and it seemed mysteriously romantic to him. Then at the bottom, under her address and numbers, she’d written “Get well soon” with a little cross. Maybe it was that Maltese thing again, but Ben suspected it was something simpler. He felt a warm glow, realising that perhaps they had parted with a kiss after all.

Ben copied her numbers into his phone, but noticing that it was quite low on battery, he then turned it off. He folded Marcie’s piece of paper carefully to put it away safely in his wallet. It wasn’t long before the same doctor who he’d seen before paid him another visit with a nurse, who closed the curtains behind her. The young man explained that he hadn’t wanted to disturb Ben earlier while had a visitor. He stopped Ben’s oxygen flow, asking him to breathe through his mouth and stand up, then listened to his chest once again with a chilly stethoscope.

“Good. Well, it sounds like there’s plenty of air in there,” he said finally, “but I’ll turn the gas back on now, and I’d like you to keep the oxygen line on overnight, if it’s not too much bother. Was that your wife who was here? Oh, just your girlfriend then. Well, will she be all right to keep an eye on you if we discharge you tomorrow? That’s great. Have a restful night now, and I’ll leave a note for tomorrow morning’s ward doctor to recommend that you can go home. Take care now.”

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