

THE LAST GOODBYE

by Katherine Wyeth

The very last time I saw him, I was late. The tube carriage was crowded and when I got to Moorgate I found the Hammersmith & City line was down. I emerged into the spitting night to find a bus and as I hurried through the traffic I called my mum to let them know I was on my way. I heard my own harried voice explaining, and then his – in the background, frail but enthusiastic “Tell her to get a taxi, I can’t wait”.

I ‘Ummed and Ahhed’ for a moment with reluctance, not understanding myself my own misplaced frugality. My mother’s voice tinged with sharpness, “Well we’ll pay for it darling” and I relented quickly. After I’d paid the cab I walked briskly through the stone arch and narrow alley entrance of St Bart’s, through the courtyard with the single, laden tree, round to the side of the main building and up a shallow stair, into the lift – the wait always interminable, and out, and down a ubiquitous linoleum clad hall... my hand outstretched, the heat of its print upon a glass door, my eyes darting to the little plaque above it bearing the name ‘Gordon Hamilton Fairley’ in white raised letters, before it swung open, and my feet carried me into the fluorescent light and blue curtains of Ward 5A.

Slowing my step, I continued to weave through, past the steel bed frames cordoned with their fabric walls, the little ‘day room’ where I never saw any patients sitting. The duty nurse is Korean, her white uniform buckling over her ample bosom, her calves thick in flat-heeled black shoes and wisps of her black hair escaping their clips. She smiles at me, without knowing who I am. I haven’t been here enough. And then there it is, his little white bed and its mound of cushions. Bottles of unfinished drink and their residue of sticky brown circles on the windowsill, some shabby fuchsias in a glass vase; and the cluttered bed-stand: pill bottles, the baseball clippings his mother sends him every week from New jersey, his spectacles – one arm held on with elastic. My mother wears a long purple skirt. She sits beside him in

a chair, partly obscured by the reading lamp. Her fingers rest limply on his and with her other hand she rubs her jaw, to relieve the tension there. It's a habit she's always had.

His lips are dry – so dry, the skin on them chapped and peeling. He is pallid with deep hollows in his cheeks, clammy skinned, and his eyeballs are yellowed. He is turned slightly away from me and his nightshirt is stretched over his back, so you can see how thin he is. The knob of each vertebrae pokes out along his spine, like a line of child's fists. I want to look away, but I make myself hold my gaze. His gaunt face looks oversized atop his small frame. It looks so small. I get a flash of him years ago racing me down the pavement with great springing strides, his tweed jacket flapping around his colossal frame, me laughing and squealing to catch up, him pulling ghoulish faces and then cracking up into laughter, his face crumpling with laughter. I notice my own distress only from the familiar creeping numbness, and I pay it no heed. I lean over to kiss him, avoiding his lips.

They both enliven at the sight of me. His face twists into a sort of lightness, and I hope he can't see the deadening that's taken root in my chest. I perch awkwardly on the bed and for a while we chat amiably, the happy face of a little family. He asks about Stephan and life in Bristol, how my degree is going. I don't tell him that we're splitting up, that two weeks prior I spent the night with a man – pale with thick black hair and a slender body, who I hardly know, so drunk I'd broken wind loudly as we coupled clumsily in the dark and he'd looked up in shock. Or how I'd barely remembered it the next morning, how it had come back in swiftly drawn gasps: feet softly pounding up the stairwell, quickly stripping trainers and jeans, one sock barely off... and the falling when it was over, the deep, dreamless sleep. But I don't share any of that. I make some superficial, cordial reply; though my mother and I briefly share a glance.

We fall into silence for a while; then he asks about my upcoming trip: what am I going to be doing on the placement? My answer is glib and quick, even dismissive. I

wonder again at my strangeness; inwardly chastising myself I take a breath and try, in measured tones, to answer more fulsomely.

“It’s a wildlife reserve that has been set up only in the last few years: the land reclaimed from agricultural use and all the native species shipped back in. I’m going to be assisting with all of the conservation related labour, and hopefully with some research on lion and cheetah too.”

I stop. Its pathetic really, my best effort. He makes an interested noise, like a soft chirrup, but there’s a faint glaze of disappointment. But that disappears quickly as the coughs come on; for a few minutes he’s racked with them. My mum and I flutter nervously on the margin, helplessly, not helping. At last he clears his throat painfully, and then eyeballs us accusingly for a long, long moment, first one then the other. I don’t have any idea what to do, so I just hold his stare.

I don’t really remember what we talked of after that. But around 10pm I got up to slowly gather my things.

“You could stay the night at HQ”, piped mum.

“I better not, I’ve got so much to organise and just a day now before I go. Thanks though.”

“Will you be alright getting back this late?”

“Yeah, there’s a train in half an hour, I’ll be home before midnight.”

“Well, alright...”

I turned to him, using the pet name we’ve always had for each other.

“Alright Pie, I’ll call before I leave, and again when I’ve landed”

“Love you”

“Bye then”

“Bye bye”.

And then I was walking away, a little wave before I rounded the corner, and then through the ward, my hand on the door, the lift again and its slow descent, back out into the night, the cold lamplight and the colder rain, hurrying along the street to the long train home. Staring at the window cutting the night from the bright carriage, my finger tracing the path of dark rain as it runs down in diagonal rivulets.

Not thinking that that was the last time I'd ever see him. Not believing I was running away. Not foreseeing the anguish at the loss of him that would assail me like a leaf in a gale, years down the line when I finally started to *feel* again.

No, not thinking of that. Thinking of nothing.

But there was one more time.

2 years after his death. It's Christmas Eve and snow is falling in Finchley. I'm not even thinking about him in that moment, though his absence is acute. I'm with a new partner, hosting for my parents. Its always a little strange having them over together – but we all make do.

I walk into the bathroom, turn the faucet, look into the mirror... and I am hit by a wave of love so strong it almost knocks me to the floor. The air becomes thick with light – as though it had substance – like silk. I stare into my own eyes – but it is not me that is looking – it is Him!

I look at myself through *his* eyes. I have never looked so beautiful. My face swims with radiance. I feel his love penetrate my heart and its strength is such that it weakens me like a wound. I could fall. I feel him within and all around me. I stand there swaying in the most intense experience of love that I have ever had – and the minutes stretch.

When I come out of the bathroom my mother is standing in the hall. She takes one look at me and asks, "What is it?"

So I tell her, in hushed whispers I tell her, and we embrace, and we both weep. At last I weep.