

From Now Until Forever

ROWAN COLEMAN

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XII



*Hours fly,
Flowers die:
New days,
New ways:
Pass by!
Love stays.*

Henry van Dyke

Chapter One

When it happens, it's almost like a memory, or a rehearsal for one. Like something I've half-imagined a hundred times. Not quite real and not quite true, but immovable.

'Is there anyone with you?' she asks. Ten minutes ago I was staring through the window, watching the rain and planning what I'd make for dinner, and now for the first time ever since I turned 18 she is asking me if I brought anyone with me.

'Nope,' I say. 'Just me, Doc.'

'Right.' Her hand reaches across the desk and briefly covers mine. A tiny break in the cool professional exterior that I have always known, that tells me everything. 'It's not good news, Ben. As you know from previous treatments, aneurysms have been a symptom of your Marfan syndrome. Over the last few years we've dealt with a few. However, the most recent scans show a new one in your brain, right next to the brain stem. It's large – 5 centimetres in diameter – and the cause of your headaches and the increase in blurred vision.'

It dawns on me that this is about to be the worst moment of my life, yet I can't feel it. Everything seems to be happening in slow motion.

'Right,' I say uncertainly. 'But most of the time I feel pretty normal really. Maybe I made too big of a deal of it?' She says nothing. I hear her swallow. 'So, you can clip this one too, right? Or stick a balloon in?'

Mrs Patterson shakes her head minutely.

'I'm afraid that the location of the aneurysm means that to attempt to treat it as we normally would is extremely dangerous, with perhaps a 3-per-cent chance of a total recovery. It is much

more likely that you wouldn't survive the surgery, or if you did, you would be severely brain-damaged. As such, I cannot recommend this course of action in good conscience. If we do nothing, aside from mitigating the symptoms, the quality of your remaining life will be good.' She pauses, frowning deeply, and then looks at me. 'You will have symptoms but not debilitating ones. You will be able to enjoy the rest of your life, though it will in all likelihood not be a long one.'

'How long is not long?' I ask her slowly, waiting for what I'm hearing to materialise into a tangible reality that I can touch and feel.

'With the size it is now, and the extreme pressure of blood flow through the vessel, it will rupture at some point in the coming months, weeks or...' she hesitates, 'it could be days, Ben. There is no way of knowing exactly when. When it happens, it will likely be very fast – you won't experience prolonged pain or suffering.'

'There's always that.' Thunder rolls outside; it sounds like a bag of rattling bones. I look at the photographs of her daughter in her graduation gown on the desk, and think about my mum sitting at the kitchen table I grew up eating at. About my sister Kitty doing a job that bores her rigid to keep a roof over her kid's head. My dog, Pablo, sleeping by the front door, waiting for me to return to my drafting desk where the engineering project that is – was – going to make my fortune lies almost finished.

'I'll give you medication for the pain and nausea,' Mrs Patterson says, coming around to my side of the desk. 'You'll be discharged from my care and a district nurse will be in touch with all the information you need on the drug regime. There are very good support groups and counselling available. She will have all the information you need. But I'm not going anywhere. You have my phone number. You can reach out, ask me any questions once you've had a chance to process this.'

'Thanks, Doc.' I nod. 'You're the best.'

'Good luck, Ben.'

All that stuff I didn't do, because I thought it wasn't the right time. The women I walked away from. The parties I missed to

study. Never really travelled; never danced until it felt like my heart was bursting; never jumped out of an aeroplane or learnt how to surf. Never joined Instagram or skinny-dipped. Never really fell in love. The late, lonely hours building up my business, because I had all the time in the world to actually live. Or at least I thought I did. I will never be a dad.

I try to shake her hand as I stand up, but she pulls me into a tight hug. I feel her shoulder shaking, and this should be the moment it hits home, but all I feel is sorry for her. Sorry for this brilliant woman, who cares more than she probably should about me.

‘Sorry.’ She takes a step back, smoothing down her skirt. ‘Not very professional.’

‘Don’t be sorry for caring. We’ve known each other a long time,’ I say. ‘Thank you. Thanks for everything.’

I walk out of the hospital and into what happen to be the last chapters of my nothing-special life. Turning my face up to the rain, I let it soak me through, running down my neck, under my collar and ice down my back. Not tears.

Thing is, I thought I was in the middle, not at the end. And now? Now seems impossible to navigate.

‘Never rains but it pours, does it?’ an old lady mutters next to me when I walk out of the rain and into the train station. Clear plastic rain bonnet tied under her chin, a face etched with a life lived and eyes that sparkle with more yet to come. ‘You want to get home and get dry, lad – you’ll catch your death.’

I laugh. The station steams up as more and more people stream in, seek shelter from the rain. Puddles from hurriedly shaken-out umbrellas reflect the lights overhead.

‘Need help with your bags?’

‘No, job’s a good ’un,’ she says. ‘Got my trolley, see? Now you go and get something hot in you. Look white as a sheet, you do.’

‘I’m heading that way now,’ I reply, looking up at the live train times. My rucksack weighs heavy on my shoulders, packed with

essentials for overnight stays in case I need a hospital admission at short notice.

Scanning the departures board, I see that the next train to Hebden Bridge leaves in five minutes. I think of my mum sitting at the kitchen table alone, reading a book and having a coffee. Of my sister Kitty, at work at the garage, or maybe she's got the day off with my nephew Elliot, all blissfully unaware of the bomb I'm about to drop into their lives. And I think of all the things I will need to get sorted: my optical-engineering business, the project I've spent years on that is almost finished, unpaid bills, that walk I promised Pablo just before I left. All of those things I thought could wait a couple of hours, before a couple of hours seemed so precious. I have no idea how to do this.

The train just above mine begins to flash, last call to board. A fast train to London, a city where I know no one and have never been, leaving in three minutes.

Something instinctive takes a grip of my heart. Maybe it's fear, maybe it's desire. I don't know anything except that I need to try and find a way out of my own skin so that I can think. So that I can feel.

Breaking into a run, I scramble on to the London train just as the doors are closing, and tumble into the first empty seat I find. For the first time in my life I don't have a plan and I'm terrified.

Chapter Two

I've dreamt of this moment for almost the whole of my whole life. Now that it's here, I'm terrified it won't work. On the other side of the huge, gilded, rococo double doors is the hum of excited conversation and the clink of champagne flutes. They open on to what was once the ballroom of one of the most lavish and fashionable addresses in London, now the Bianchi Collection, named after the wealthy widow who bequeathed her home and its contents to the people of London in perpetuity. This is the place where I work so many hours. I all but live here. This is the place to which I have pinned my fragile hopes. And if they crumble away to dust once again, then I will finally know that I've reached the end of *looking for the end*. After that I cannot imagine.

The opulent, golden-mirrored ballroom is brimful with the great, good and not so good of the art and museum world, their otherworldly reflections shimmering in the polished floor – as above so below. All of them are here for the preview night of the exhibition that I have spent years bringing to the Collection. At last Leonardo da Vinci's surviving portraits are here.

'Are you going in, Vita?' Anna, my boss smiles at me. 'You look beautiful, by the way. Is that genuine Dior?'

'What, this old thing?' I gesture down a vintage Fifties gown of dove-grey silk and tulle that fits as if it were made for me. 'What can I say? It was just hanging about at home.'

'How do you have such an impressive array of made-to-measure fashion through the ages just hanging about at home?' Anna asks incredulously. 'You could exhibit your wardrobe at the V&A.'

‘Comes from a long line of hoarding predecessors,’ I tell her with a smile. ‘We never can bear to throw anything away.’

Anna takes my hand.

‘Are you nervous? You’re hovering around out here like Cinderella,’ Anna decides. ‘You know you can go to the ball, darling, don’t you? It is your party. You are Princess Charming. The rest of us are the fawning admirers of your amazing achievement.’

‘I know you’re right,’ I say. ‘It’s just a lot, you know? It feels like there’s a lot at stake. More than I realised.’

Years planning and negotiating, and begging and bargaining with all the great museums and galleries of the world to bring almost all the remaining Da Vinci portraits to the Collection in one single exhibition. All that work and time has come down to this moment.

Anna nods. ‘After tonight, the whole of London will know your name,’ she promises.

The thought makes me shudder.

‘I’m not sure I like the thought of that,’ I half joke, obscuring my true fears. ‘But it’s not even that.’ I choose my words carefully. ‘I have a lot of questions about these works. And I hope that while I am their custodian, I will finally be able to answer them.’

‘I’m sure your research will be a triumph.’ Anna squeezes my fingers. ‘Come on, Princess Charming,’ she says, smiling at the footmen who open the doors in unison. ‘Come with me and see what wonder you have created.’

‘It was Da Vinci who created the wonder,’ I say. ‘I just follow in his wake.’

By midnight the very last of the guests have left and I am almost completely alone, comforted by the balmy embrace of peace and quiet. It was a wonderful evening, a ‘resounding success’, Anna told me, though I can’t seem to recall any single detail, just a whirl of smiles and congratulations bubbling constantly like the

champagne in my glass. Now almost everyone has gone it feels as if the museum is suddenly alert, as if the occasion has woken her from a hundred-year sleep. Memories seem to dance just a few moments out of reach, as if I could turn a corner and find the echoes of revellers descending the grand staircase.

It feels like a wonderland. It feels like home.

‘Mo, would you mind?’ I ask our security head as he conducts final checks before heading back to the control centre in the basement. ‘Can I have five minutes alone in the exhibition before you turf me out?’

‘Go on, then,’ Mo says. ‘As it’s you.’ He is a father to five girls, kind and sweetly patient with the romantic whims of his superfan daughters, who have given him a surprisingly in-depth knowledge of Korean Pop that he likes to brief me over whenever we happen to be in the coffee room at the same time. ‘But if you try to leave with the *Mona Lisa* under your coat, I’m nicking you.’

‘We haven’t got the *Mona Lisa*,’ I remind him. ‘The Louvre wouldn’t part with her, not for anything.’

‘I never liked that one anyway,’ he says, winking at me. ‘You enjoy them all to yourself. You’ve worked hard on this, Vita. You look like you just fell out of the stars.’

‘I don’t exactly know what that means, but I’m taking it as a compliment,’ I tell him.

The paintings glow like gemstones in the dark, each one lit so that they appear to levitate. Their images are so familiar that they are almost commonplace, and yet to see them here together never fails to give me a frisson of shock and awe. Eyes seem to search out mine, lips poised, as if at any moment they might say my name.

I stop in front of *Lady with an Ermine*, or Cecilia Gallerani as she was known in real life. Eternally capricious and coquettish as ever, the favourite mistress of the Duke of Milan, she could always light up a room with her wit and grace. Then I move on to

Ginevra de' Benci, the poor sallow-faced young woman painted on the eve of her marriage to a man she did not love. So much sorrow and fatigue in her tired features, as if she is already ready for the death that came for her just a few months after the painting was completed. At least I have known love in my life. Ginevra de' Benci's sad gaze always reminds me of that.

These portraits are exquisite, they are each marvels, but they are not the work of art that makes my heart pound with excitement and affection. That likeness waits for me near the very end of the exhibit; her ivory complexion glows in the dark.

La Belle Ferronnière, or Portrait of an Unknown Woman as she has also been called. A serious oval face, framed by dark, straight hair, her head tilted just a fraction. She seems to watch me as I approach her, as if she has been expecting me. It's been a long while since we last met.

Standing face to face, eye to eye, we reflect one another's gaze as I wonder at her secrets. The world lost her name hundreds of years ago, historians still argue about her identity. It's not her name that matters to me though. It's who she is now; every lost woman caught for ever in that moment between smiling and weeping. And, somewhere hidden behind that almost smile, almost sob, are secrets only her creator knows.

Chapter Three

I was almost 16 when I found out that I happened to have been born with a rare genetic condition.

I'd been having headaches, blurred vision, for weeks, and I'd brushed them off. Mum made me go to the optician and they suggested I saw a neurologist. At no point did either of us think it was anything to worry about. I was totally oblivious on the train to Leeds. Mum talked the whole way there, and I pretended to listen as I looked out of the window and thought about girls and football.

That's when I first met Mrs Patterson, who told me the secrets my body had been keeping from me. Marfan syndrome. Rare, genetic, possibly inherited, though we found out later that my genes just decided to mutate in the womb – no one could really explain why. It was the reason I was the tallest kid in the year, the reason I was double-jointed and short-sighted. 'Nothing to worry about,' Mrs Patterson told us. Yes, it would need managing, monitoring, but 90 per cent of Marfan sufferers lived into their seventies these days. That had seemed like forever away to me. It still did.

'What about the other 10 per cent?' Mum had asked.

'There is an increased risk of complication with heart function or aneurysms,' Mrs Patterson had said. 'But treatments are improving all the time. Try not to worry. We'll take care of you.'

'So, what does this mean then?' I'd said to Mum on the way home.

'Nothing's really changed,' she said. 'You heard her – 90 per cent of people live a normal life. That's almost everyone. We've just got to keep an eye on you is all. Try not to think about it, love.'

I returned my gaze to the window, and even though everyone told me that everything was fine and there was nothing to worry about, I remember having the half-formed thought that *someone* had to be in that unlucky 10 per cent. Someone had to get the rough end of the deal so that the 90 per cent got their chance. Every year I went for a check-up, and every year it was fine until eventually I stopped worrying about it and the fear faded away. It never occurred to me that I didn't have all the time in the world to start to really live; it was always *after* one thing or another that I'd made my mark on the world that I'd lift up my head and really look around at it.

Fifteen years later and I'm standing in King's Cross, London. The evening has turned to late night. A guy drives a sweeper around the platforms and people come and go from the tube station all in a hurry to be somewhere. I feel like I am in a hurry to be somewhere too. The trouble is I don't know where.

When I got on the London train it was because I knew, before I even really understood, that I had to *do* something, right now or never. An instinct propelled me away from everything and everyone I knew. Sitting down next to the window, I turned off my phone without reading the waiting text from my mum. I got the notion that I should take off my watch and leave it behind. If I lost track of time then perhaps it would lose track of me, at least for a little while. It was a good watch. I had bought it for myself the first year my business turned a profit. So I tucked it into the space between the seats and wished luck to whoever found it. Whatever came next, I decided, had to *matter*. No more time to half-arse it. The only excuse I had for running away from home, friends and family was to make something happen, to *feel* something before the last second of my life got there. I couldn't let one piece of untested, unknown equipment sitting on the desk in my shed be my only legacy in this world. As the train rushed me through the landscape at 100 miles per hour it felt like my heart was the needle of a compass, pointing towards an impossible hope.

Now I recognise the Post Office Tower jutting out of the skyline, a relic of a futuristic age that never seemed to happen. It seems

like something to aim for at least, and so I start striding purposefully towards it. It's gone 11 p.m., but the streets are still busy, traffic stops and starts, sirens sound, bass thumps behind closed windows. A pub door bursts opens; I catch a burst of laughter and the scent of beer. It's tempting to feel like one of those archetypal kids with their noses pressed against sweetshop windows, longing for something they can't have, but I can have it if I want. I came here to lose myself in this labyrinth of a city, made up of myth and more questions than there are answers for. I came here, because I'm not willing to give up. I came here to find a way not to die, but to live.