

Past, Future, Present

By Kathy Childs

I can see by the look on her face that Rachel isn't pleased to be here. Resigned. Dog-tired. For her it's a mundane day of chores, another old man with wrinkled skin and a mangled body trapped in a wheelchair. Persona non grata. For me it's one of the few times I get to see another human being. The meals on wheels lady may come three times a week but she never stops to chat.

Subsidised in-home care – it has enabled me to stay in my own home for far longer than I should have. It has locked me into this house that I can no longer maintain and then humiliates me by sending young girls to manage my personal care. Rachel is my fifth such carer; they don't tend to stay, but she's stuck it out longer than most. Poor pay, no prospects and grumpy clients – hardly a sterling career choice. Perhaps it's because she's older than the others. The problem is that even on my good days I'm not great company; too many hours of solitude and I've lost the art of conversation. I never used to be so insular. I used to be someone.

"Rachel darling, can you grab me the photo album in the top drawer. Be a love." My voice is scratchy with disuse. I used to limber it up nightly by yelling at the TV, but the novelty wore off a few years back.

Rachel darling scowls, deepening the creases around her mouth. She hates being interrupted; she has a routine, the fastest way to the goal line and out the door.

"Don't darling me, old man." She snaps, but without any heat.

"Sorry. Old habits."

"Course they're old habits. You're old." Her voice lacks its usual venom. I've always had the impression her testiness is a front, but after three months of 'expert in-house care' I'm beginning to doubt my powers of observation.

"Please Rachel dar...." I catch myself just in time. "Help me out here, girl."

"Where is it?"

"In the dresser. Top left."

Rachel digs through the detritus and finds the ragged old album. My past. My life. My story. She wipes the dust off the cover. "Here you go. Don't expect me to look at it with you. I have work to do, old man."

"Wouldn't expect you to be interested; just an old man's memories. I was the 1962 Muscle Man of the Year. Seems a long time ago."

"Really?" Rachel leans against the dresser wiping her hands on the cleaning cloth. "Got a photo?"

I flip past my scrawny youth and gangling teens and find the photo. Twenty-six and proud as a peacock. I run my finger down the photo; the images coalescing in my mind of the backstage dust and mildew mingling with the smells of oil and testosterone. Ah, those were the days.

"Is that really you?"

"Yes, really. I wasn't born this way you know. I was young once."

"Of course you were." She's looking over my shoulder now as I thumb through the album.

"Where is that one taken?"

"The dressing room." There I stood, my skin sleek and tanned, glistening with oil rubbed on by some striking lass. I had washboard abs, tree trunk thighs and broad muscular shoulders. I was a sight to behold.

"What a hunk." Rachel isn't shy with her words.

"I was rather, wasn't I?" I'd forgotten I knew how to preen. It's rather nice. "Won first prize that night."

"What went wrong?"

Deflated I close the book, trapping my old self inside. "Life got in the way of dreams."

"What do you mean?" Rachel seems genuinely interested now. She's been cleaning the house and washing my privates for five months now. We chat superficially as a way to get through the awkward moments when the washcloth descends, but never about our personal lives. It never seems appropriate somehow.

But I'm dressed now and, as I settle down into my past, a lifetime of memories washes over me. I run my hand over the cover of the album, the cracked vinyl under my fingertips a reminder of just how long ago it all was. I turn to 1962 and, peeling back the cellophane cover, remove the black and white photograph. I hold the photo

to my nose and breathe deeply, trying to recreate the moment. “I was 26 years old and I was the best of the best. Brooklyn, New York – the final event for the season and I was competing against the top bodybuilders from all around the world. I was buffed. I’d worked hard to chisel every muscle, to tone every fibre. Now, there was perfection.”

“If you do say so yourself.” Rachel laughs. The first sign today that there is a spark in her. She wears her life like a heavy grey cloak.

“Actually I do.” I smile at her. “Look at me. There is a man in his prime.” I hold the photo out so she can see me clearly, the fine lines of a perfectly sculpted body.

“Easy to do when you don’t have to work for a living.”

“What makes you think that? I worked on the wharf during the day, six days a week, and trained and toned at night. Those aren’t fake muscles like the blokes at the gym these days. They were the real deal. Carrying bags of wheat off the ships to the cargo pallets, one, twenty, fifty. Builds the torso. I ate healthy food though, unlike the other blokes who would shove down some greasy muck. Not me. Protein and carbs. Bastards gave me a hard time, you know, about that, but no one was game to take me on. I was tough too, a street fighter from way back.”

Rachel looks me up and down. She sees the ancient, decrepit body; the wheels that I rely for movement. Her eyes look sad. She sees me watching and brusquely turns away.

“I have to get back to work.”

“Do you? Do you really?”

She turns back and I look her straight in the eye, something I’ve never done before. I’m old you see and it’s humiliating. Not the housecleaning, that’s fine. It’s the other; too personal, too embarrassing. So I avoid eye contact, keep my distance.

“Rachel, sit a minute. Let’s talk.”

“I...” She holds my gaze momentarily then looks away, her attention diverted by the trilling of her phone. Reaching into her apron pocket she silences the ringtone while glancing at the screen. Head tilted to one side she looks in my direction, opens her mouth to speak, then thinks better of it and answers the phone instead.

“What’s up honey bunch? Home already?” She wanders off down the hall to take the call in private.

I look to my left. Rachel’s bag is lying there, her purse visible, almost reaching out to me. She seldom leaves the room without it. Moving is not easy these days, but

I figure with a stretch I can just about grab it. The question is should I? A choice. I manoeuvre myself closer to the bag and lean across the tattered arm of my wheeled chariot. I am just about to grab the leather strap when I hear Rachel returning. I sit back quickly, knocking my elbow on the metal support and adopt a nonchalant look while cursing inwardly. Bloody funny bone. Whoever named the damn thing should be shot.

“What’s it like to have had all of that and now, well, be like you are?” Rachel is behind me, her voice soft, gentle; leftover sentiment from speaking with her daughter.

I rub my elbow to mellow the pain. “Hard. Harder some days than others.” I twist my neck so that I can see her. “Some days I find it difficult to remember that I was ever young. Other days it seems like I still am 26 inside and my body aged to spite me, trapping me in the carcass of an old man. I have days when I feel like standing up and dancing, when I want to throw my arm around a gorgeous girl and dance off into the night. And then,” I turn away from her, “And then I remember who I am now. Remember that my dancing days are over.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What for? For being young?” I don’t like the bitterness in my voice. I try to bury it with my words. “I had my time. And what a time it was. The world was my oyster and everything I dreamed came true. How many people can say that?”

“Not me, that’s for sure.” Rachel picks up the cloth and starts dusting again, her back to me. “You know, I always wanted to own my own shop, be self-employed; to have a little place where I could sell old jewellery and clothes. Vintage stuff mainly. You know, from the 20’s and 30’s right up to the 60’s. In the back an old gramophone would be playing vinyl records.” Rachel smiles and sits down on the arm of the easy chair, her eyes distant. “The retail counter would be made from the back of an old Chevy, cut down, all pink and chrome. The whole place would have pockets of time – a 20’s space with a flapper theme, a 40’s place with a war theme and in the back a 60’s café with booths and staff in costume.”

“You’ve given this a lot of thought.”

“Well dreams are free.” Rachel’s voice is harsh now and she stands up and starts moving the ornaments rather than dusting around them. “Life however isn’t; which is why I am here.”

“You have a daughter, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Her clipped tone makes it very clear the conversation is to end here.

I can take a hint as well as the next man - well at least when it suits me. “Did you ever get as far as a business plan?”

Rachel turns and looks at me again. “Why?”

“Just interested.”

She tucks her hair behind her ear, cocking her head to the side, while she makes the decision whether or not to answer. “Actually, I did. My daughter’s father is a financier and he helped me draw up a business plan and we even did a budget. We were going to start the business together. He was going to finance it and I was going to run it.”

“What went wrong?”

“His wife.”

“Ah.”

“Yes. Ah.”

“Would you let me look at the plan?”

“Why?”

“I know quite a bit about business. Just because the body is old doesn’t mean the mind is dim.”

“No point really.”

“Why not?”

“No money.”

“And the motivation. Is that gone too?”

“No.” Rachel’s voice is melancholy. “No, it’s still there. I buy a lottery ticket every week and I still dream it might happen. But that’s all it is. A dream.” She stands up straighter; pulls her shoulders back. “Besides, old man, what would you do without me?”

“And if you won the lottery? Would you do it?”

“In a heartbeat, but I know the chances of winning so I keep working and keep dreaming. One day, before I’m too old, I hope it all comes true. You never know. I haven’t checked my ticket. Perhaps this will be the week.” Her attempt at flippancy is feeble. She doesn’t believe.

Rachel’s phone trills again. “Shit, I’m meant to have finished here. Teach me to gasbag. Look, I’ll just give the bathroom a once over and do a proper job on

Thursday. That okay?" Without waiting for an answer Rachel picks up her bucket of cleaning products and marches into the bathroom.

I smile to myself as I lift her purse out of her bag and replace her lottery ticket with the one from my top pocket. I have made my choice. Second division win. After all, what can an old broken man with no family do with \$330,000 dollars anyhow?