

Jump by Jennifer Paull

The world lurched as John stepped out of the bar, the cool night air briefly blissful against his face, before he had to run after the man stumbling surprisingly quickly away from him.

“Tony! Tony stop! Where are you going?”

“Go away, leave me alone, just get away from me!!”

John took a step back, surprised by the ferocity of Tony’s reaction. He braced himself against a wall for a moment before he noticed a familiar face in the back of a taxi beckoning to him.

“Come on John, he’ll be fine, he’s only after attention. Get in and we can drop you off on the way.”

John sighed. “I can’t just leave him...”

Chelsea leaned over Mark. “Why the hell not? He’s always pulling this drama queen act.”

“You go on. I’ll just grab him and we’ll walk back.”

“If you’re sure.” The window rolled up and the taxi pulled away slowly, letting an undignified procession of drunken clubbers cross the road before retreating into the night. John continued on after the shadowy form of this man he barely knew. Too afraid that Tony would run if he said anything else, John followed at what he hoped was a discrete distance, concentrating on staying upright and subduing the nausea that was slowly clawing its way up his throat.

When he eventually looked up again Tony was making his way into a car park with far more purpose than a man who didn’t own a car should have.

“Wait!” John called, as he managed to jog the few painful paces between them before grabbing Tony’s wrist, only to be sharply shrugged off.

At least he wasn’t running away, but John’s unease grew as they reached the first ramp up to the next level. He made a grab for him again and this time he managed to hold on.

“Tony, what’re you doing?”

He didn’t answer, just pushed John away and continued on more quickly up the ramps.

“Tony, come back! Tony tell me what’s wrong!”

“Everything,” John barely heard the mumbled reply. “Everything’s fucking wrong.”

“What’s wrong? Tell me and maybe we can work it out.”

Third level. Only one left.

“Tony stop please! Please!”

They were almost running up the last ramp and John was impressed that he had yet to fall over. He couldn’t believe that Tony was really going to do what he seemed to be doing, he had to believe that this wasn’t real, that Chelsea was right and Tony was only acting like a drama queen like he so often did, but it just didn’t seem that way this time.

Once they reached the top Tony didn't go for the nearest railing and John half breathed a sigh of relief before he realised Tony had his eyes fixed on the longer drop on far side. John tackled him and Tony landed heavily on top of him, the angle forcing John's bare arm solidly into the floor and leaving skin behind on the concrete.

There was no time to think about the burning in his arm as Tony dived forward again, reaching for the edge as he stumbled. John managed to get his fingers round a flapping shirt sleeve, spinning Tony so fiercely he sprawled across the concrete, rolling sideways before coming to a stop worryingly near the ramp down to the next level.

John couldn't believe how much he was shaking as he looked down at the moaning man on the floor. He had no idea what had just happened: he had known that Tony was depressed sometimes, but he hadn't been prepared for this. It wasn't as if they really knew each other: he was just a friend of a friend. John cursed Susie furiously under his breath for asking him to take care of such a screwed up man. What frightened him more though was just how much he wanted to pitch Tony over the side right now.

He settled for grabbing Tony's arm and trying to haul him to his feet.

"Come on. Come on Tony!"

For a moment he thought Tony was unconscious, but slowly, and with much pulling from John, he got his feet under him, swaying as he stood.

He wouldn't look at John, but he could see the hatred there nonetheless.

Fine, John thought, if that's the way you feel.

He started walking down the ramp, tried to stop himself looking back to see if Tony was following, but all he could hear was his own voice, promising to look after the guy, until eventually he glanced back and was relieved to see Tony traipsing along doggedly behind him, head down so far it was a wonder he didn't bump into the dark concrete pillars that reared up at regular intervals to block his path. John paused, waiting for him to catch up, but turned away as he caught Tony's eye. There was a depth there that he was not ready to see.

Once outside he tried to think of what to do, but all he could think was that he wished the whole experience had not sobered him up quite so much. Tony was just behind him, plodding resolutely with no sign of stopping. He passed John and headed off in a completely unhelpful direction.

"Hey! Stop!" John ran and stood in front of him, gently turning him around by the shoulders. "Uh, let's go this way."

The only place John could think of to go was the hospital, but that was half an hour's walk away. He never took his phone out with him in case it was lost or broken in some drunken good idea, but he really could do with an ambulance, taxi, anything about now.

"Hey Tony? Can I borrow your phone?"

"No hospitals." Tony mumbled as he pulled his mobile out of his pocket and flipped it open, staring at it with a thoughtful expression as if he didn't know how to use it.

"Whatever," John said as Tony made no move to give it to him or to call someone himself. "Just, can I borrow?"

It made a disheartening crack sound as Tony hurled it at the pavement
“What the?!”

John inspected the damage but it was no use: it had broken along the hinge and showed no signs of life as he frantically pressed the buttons.

“What are we supposed to do now?!”

He turned around to see Tony wandering off in the opposite direction.

“Crap! Come back here.”

Soft grey stars danced in front of his vision as John ran to catch up with the inconsolable figure and for a moment he thought he was going to throw up. Luckily, breaking the phone seemed to have leeches the last of the fight out of Tony and he came around readily as John gently steered him in the direction he wanted to go. Every now and then as they started their long walk Tony would wander off at a tangent and John would be forced to manoeuvre him back onto the pavement or down a side street, but his own hangover was starting to make itself known it was becoming difficult to concentrate. The cold insinuated itself into every part of him until it felt as if his bones would freeze in place, and he kicked himself for not taking the taxi with Chelsea and Mark even as he nudged Tony to stop him walking into a lamppost.

He couldn't keep his attention away from the growing thump-thump pounding its way through his head and he almost didn't notice when Tony disappeared from his side as they crossed a street. Realising too late he tried to reach to pull him out of the way of an oncoming taxi, only managing to grab the back of his shirt and haul him nearer the pavement. Still, there was no way he would have succeeded had the driver not been slowing to pull up beside them. The dark sign on the top didn't give him much to hope for, but he silently prayed anyway for one this one thing to go in his favour tonight.

“You guys looking for a lift?” The cabbie asked through the open window.

“Oh god yes! Thank you! Oi, get in.” He practically had to push the reluctant Tony in and checked the back doors were locked before saying their destination.

“Casualty please.”

John lifted his waiting room coffee to his lips and winced as the grazed skin of his arm under the bandage pulled. The nurse had just told him that they were going to admit Tony for a day or two and that he could visit now, but first he needed fortifying and since there was no vodka on offer coffee would have to do.

“Oh you're awake.” He said as he pulled back the curtain to Tony's cubicle, sliding it closed again behind himself.

Tony's back remained resolutely turned away from any intrusion into his misery.

“They're going to admit you for a couple of days. Want me to bring some stuff for you?”

“You shouldn't have brought me here.”

John shrugged. “I promised Susie I'd look after you.”

“Well I'm telling you not to. You should have just left me alone.”

"I can't do that. I didn't promise you, did I?"

"You don't even like me. I've heard you talking before."

Perfect. It was true, John didn't like him. He was a miserable, morbid, lazy man, but he hadn't meant to drive him over the edge.

"It doesn't matter."

Tony buried his head under his arm.

"You should have just let me die," came the muffled reply.

John wondered if he agreed as he took Tony's house key from the bedside table. He could grab a few things and be back before it even got light.