

DANCING IN THE RAIN

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II

You be the King

Phoebe Blakey

It was only on windy days that Jimmy would pull out the chess-board and ask me about the meaning of life. He'd push the jam off to one side of the plate and eat them in succession: scone, jam, cream, scone, jam, cream — until Mother walked past and slapped his ear — 'What the *hell*, James?'

When it was quiet he'd push a pawn down the board and whisper, 'If I were the King, could I live forever?'

I'd sigh and moan and roll my eyes, 'What are you on about now, Jimmy?'

Then I'd call to him checkmate, and he would jump up and clap like he just won the lottery. He never really understood chess.

Well, this day is windy. And I don't mean nice summer breeze, I mean howling. The rattling of wood and branches against windows is so vicious, I would not be surprised if our house was ripped out of the ground and catapulted to Kansas. I find, unusually, Jimmy isn't at the kitchen table (our usual game spot). I creep down the hall, passing Mother's room, the sharp smell of alcohol wafting out from underneath the door. Peeking my head into Jimmy's room — nope. Nothing. Nada. Nothing but the Luke Skywalker poster on the wall stared back at me. (Yeah, he was born a little after his time.) I step in, careful to close the door quietly behind me, and tiptoe over to the wide-open window. The powerful current of wind is sending figurines and bottles of pills from his bookshelves onto the floorboards, landing with tiny little

thuds. Muttering swear words to myself, I quickly scribble a 'be back soon' note on a receipt and slide it under the door before climbing out the window and lowering myself down the ivy.

I pull out my phone, dialing Eric's number frantically, fingers trembling and blue. Barely three minutes pass before he appears in his car and I jump in. He has to yell to me over the howl and hiss of the trees, bellowing, 'D'you mind if I take it a bit faster? It's gonna be dark early today and I want you guys back before she beats the shit out of all of us.' I reply with, 'You included. Got it,' as I climb in, pulling the door shut tight before we dart off towards the horizon, no warning.

She, of course, is Mother. She didn't *always* beat us — Jimmy and I. Hell, it's only the drunken days she even touches one of Dad's old belts.

At some point on the trip, I must have cried or at least made some kind of sad expression, because Eric reaches out and rests one of his hands on my knee. It isn't exactly soothing, more exhilarating. His hand is warm. His car has the most peculiar yet familiar smell, a mix of chocolate and tobacco, but it is a sweet scent and I place my head against the headrest and drink it in like melted honey. I glance at Eric's face, hard and focused on the road ahead of him. He has rough features — a jagged jawline, pointy nose, and a sharp gaze. His lips look soft.

I know I'm dammed for saying it, but, sometimes I think Eric's more of a brother to me than Jimmy ever could be. It has nothing to do with me not loving Jimmy — I do. It's just really, really — like, *really* — hard to connect on an emotional level with a kid like ... that.

When I was fourteen and Eric was sixteen I thought I was in love with him. Jimmy had seen me holding his hand once, and screeched, 'Cursed, Lou! He's kissed more boys than you!' I don't know if I believed him. He's been said to be a compulsive liar.

'Okay,' Eric begins. 'What are you feeling?' I laugh to myself. It was a game we played when we were young: who's got the

better vocabulary, me or you? (Me, please.) Who's got the better life? (You.)

I breathe in through my nose, puffing up my chest, and say, 'Altschmerz'.

'I'm stumped,' Eric laughs.

'Definition, ready? It's a weariness or boredom with having had the same issues and anxieties for a long time.'

It goes quiet, and we pull into a parking spot on the side of the road. Eric looks at me, staring deep into my eyes, nothing but affection in his hard-but-soft face. 'I'm so sorry, Lou.'

I don't know if I believe anything. Even if it were true — is it? — he could be bi. Was he bi? Was he *anything*? It's really not a long drive to the park. I've clocked it over the years to around seven minutes. How is it possible for such a short space of time to feel so full, so charged with electricity? *No*, I tell myself. *Think of your brother, your poor disabled brother who has run away.* And I throw myself out of the car, pulling my zipper up to my neck as a shield from the wind. Everything is grey out here. The trees are sad skeletons and the sky is one big grey blanket, dampening and darkening the world beneath it.

Jimmy, the poor sod, is standing in the usual spot. He lifts up his hand and reveals a shiny wooden chess piece, passing it to me. It's the King.

He beams back at me. 'I ran away!' He shouts, laughing and smiling because he doesn't understand.

'No. You went for a walk, okay?' I say to him. Slowly. Tenderly.

Jimmy looks at the car and sees a concerned Eric staring back, eyes darting between at the pair of us. His gaze settles on me, lingers. My breath catches in my throat. *Brother.*

'Will she hurt me, Lou?'

I bob down so that I am crouching slightly, with my eyes at Jimmy's level, and brush a lock of crazed, bushy, blowing hair

behind his ear. From behind me, I hear Eric call. 'You'll be okay,' is what he says.

I smile sadly at Jimmy, being strong for him, because who else can? I put the chess piece back in his palm, and close his slender fingers over the oak. 'Nah,' I say casually. 'Not if you be the King'



Phoebe Blakey wrote this in 2015 when she was in Year 11 at Toorak College in Victoria.