

THEIR bodies align. Bound by an invisible connection, like synchronised watches.

‘Faster,’ breathes Chloe.

Gary increases the pace, feels his heart beat a little quicker, a little more sweat bead his brow.

‘Keep it up,’ she instructs.

Morning sunshine strokes exposed skin. Trees shield them from the roadside, dandelions, forget-me-nots, bluebells flourishing. A cherry blossom scent.

This shared journey’s become routine. Gary marvels at how in step they are, the precision of cogs. Limbs matching stride-for-stride, they jog in harmony. She’d suggested this escape from lockdown; he hadn’t found the new apartment so stifling. Gary watches their reflection in the canal’s still waters, a mirror of mirrors. Her enviable figure, cling-film wrapped in black leggings and sports vest, somehow slimmer. He’s stayed the same.

*Different appetites*, he concedes.

Reaching where they usually pause – a worn bench by the closed pub he craves – Chloe keeps running. Gary slows. *She’d agreed to keep at my pace*. A rusted bike fished from the canal, wheels bent, spokes cracked, gives him a shudder. He catches up without a word, reasoning how much her drive, her decisiveness, first attracted him last year. Just as his casualness charmed her.

Chloe quickens. Gary matches. This new, competitive element refreshing as the breeze. It’s their secret, exchanged telepathically, that link so strong. Chloe laughs and Gary echoes the refrain. He goes faster. Then her. The lead swaps. Equals. Interchanges. They almost collide.

Chloe's ahead. Gary feels a tightness in his chest. She glances back. A strand of auburn hair escaping the sweet bun reaches out. Heart pounding, he accelerates. A family of swans glide past. An ache. Huffing, Gary glares at them.

Then Chloe strays from the beaten path. Crosses a road. Ascends a steep, narrow track into hilly moorland.

Gary follows, sludge-streaked white trainers struggling for grip. A stone digs inside them but he daren't halt. The faint hum of traffic like the static of a lost reception. Stones become boulders. The rough tread of her heels spits mud. He considers she might be cross with him, then dismisses the thought.

Chloe skips over rocks and puddles; Gary navigates them. The gap widens like the hands of a ticking clock. No time to reflect.

Chloe throws him a frown. Thighs leaden, calves cramping, stitch threading his side, Gary stumbles. It's painful to keep going – but will hurt more to stop. He longs for home comforts.

Across barren countryside they run. The cloudy sky darkens. Colder, blustery. A swaying copse won't protect them from the elements. So well ahead, Chloe seems bird-like, almost soaring. Gary doubts she will ever slow, doubts his commitment, doubts everything. He sees only differences now. The stabs of slights and criticisms. She's long been pulling away; he'd only ever been keeping up.

Hunched over, wheezing, Gary sinks to his knees, useless as a broken clock: out of synch, out of time. Checks his mobile. No signal. Boundless, Chloe leaves him far behind. He watches her forge on into the distance.

And disappear.

*499 words*