

The Art of Being Stuck Here

a short story

by

Catherine Ryan Hyde

Tim says, “The whole concept of art bundled together with the story behind the art is flawed. I’m not saying your art is flawed, Brian, you know that; you know me better. But forcing you to stand here all evening to recite backstory...I mean...that’s something only Jongé could come up with. Most people agree it’s better to view art *without* the artist present. Besides, you can’t stay with the art under any other circumstances, so...I mean...what if you sell something tonight?”

I say, “Then this is the night we say goodbye. I’ll miss you. I hope I sell a piece to a rich family who lives in Peru. I’ve always wanted to go there.”

I’m so glad Tim is here with me I could almost explode. Hell, I might. Which is where it crosses the line from Good Thing to Other, around the time Jongé’s gallery staff—which is a polite way of saying hungry artists who owe him a favor—have to clean my innards off the well-polished floor. Then again, it’s a modern art exhibition. Somebody might buy them.

I look into Tim's eyes for just a flash, which is just a flash too long. I nearly lose it. Not in a bad way, but then it bleeds over that line again.

Oh, shit.

I want to put my arms around him, which is all well and good, even in public, except to the extent that it isn't. Tim always calls my state of stasis "half out," but this would be the crowd for it, and isn't about that anyway. I'm frozen here by Jongé's exhibition rules (actually "mandates" or "laws" or even "threats of career death" would be more appropriate terms) and all I want to do is run. If I run into Tim's arms, that's all I'll ever be good for again. Being held. This is why I've spent so much of my life not in a relationship. It's like a warm womb, and I regress, and lose my nerve for everything else. It's the shift from Be-Held Mode to Be-a-Grown-Man Mode that's so hard for me. I say I have a sticky transmission. Tim says I'm too young to have worn out my clutch.

He has those cute crinkles at the corners of his eyes. He gets them when I amuse him. "And if you sell two pieces tonight?"

"Then I go to pieces," I say.

I knew that, one way or another, my first multi-artist exhibition would tear me to shreds.

At this exact moment, we are caught being cute and affectionate with one another by, of all people, Leona from my work. She came all this way just to see my show. She said she might, but I was hoping it was just one of those things you say when you won't. Of all the women I work with, Leona is the one who most seems to be waiting—hoping—for me to ask her...something. Probably out.

Her long blonde hair is up in a wild quasi-pattern, and she's wearing a top that barely exists at all.

"You are *so talented!*" she shrieks.

I wonder if she meant it to come out so loud. I wonder if she's unstrung by social situations. Or if I'm looking at the world through unstrung glasses. Make that contact lenses. I'd be self-conscious in glasses.

Then there's that awkward, obvious thing. No one says, Aren't you going to introduce me? but there's a big hole in the air exactly the size and shape of that sentence, and I figure it's crushing everyone beyond recognition.

"Leona, this is Tim. Tim, Leona. From the office."

Tim shakes her hand and says, heartily, "Yes, of course. Leona. Brian's told me so much about you."

I have never uttered a word about Leona to Tim. Now do you see why I love this guy so much?

A man with a ridiculous beard is eyeing one of my big three-dimensional works. When I say big...it would have to be disassembled and freighted to any potential buyer. Which is seeming less likely. Now that I see whose art is getting the most attention. Other people's.

The guy is maybe fifty, and his beard makes him look like a caricature of a painter or an art critic. I can actually imagine Mel Brooks or Carl Reiner playing a fictionalized version of him in an old 1960's sitcom.

"Tell me the significance of this title," he says, a caricature of feigned

thoughtfulness. “January 26, 1970. Why is that date important to the piece?”

Tim is hovering by my mobile art, pretending to be an objective, yet suitably impressed, gallerygoer.

I clear my throat too hard. I’m bad at this, until I hit some kind of stride. If I ever do.

“January 26, 1970 is the date of a recently unearthed memo from Nixon to Haldeman. In it, Nixon called modern art ‘decadent,’ and made it clear that under his watch N.E.A. money should not be ‘scattered all over the country in projects of this type.’ The piece is a kind of rebellion, but in a tongue-and-cheek vein. Not rising to the bait, but spotlighting the historical moment with...hopefully...just the right touch. Some disagreement, some humor. A big dash of irony...”

That’s good. Right? I think it sounds good. Until I look into Mel Reiner’s 1960’s eyes.

“Fine. That’s why a date can be important to modern art. It doesn’t answer why it’s important to *this piece*. Your work. What connects it to that moment in history?”

I can hear, despite the utter silence of it, Tim’s slight leaning in. He’s waiting for my answer.

I have no answer.

See, this is why I should always hover. I’m a good hoverer. I wear a semi-subtle hat and cruise the gallery, pretending to look at other people’s work, peripherally watching people look at mine. I’ve even been known to make a comment without revealing that I’m the artist of the work in question, thus soliciting

honest responses. Sometimes it hurts, sometimes not.

But Jongé would have none of it. Not for this show. “On this night,” he said, probably more than seven times, “the art and the artist shall be one.”

“But I’m such a good hoverer,” I said.

“Cowardice!” he barked. “What you are describing is nothing short of cowardice!”

I wanted to ask, “Why do you say that like it’s a bad thing?” I didn’t.

Mel Reiner Beard Man is still waiting for my answer. I have actual beads of sweat on my forehead. I can feel them. I wonder how obvious they are. If one is about to roll into my eye.

“I thought it was relevant to all modern art,” I say.

Fail.

As he walks away, he throws this over his shoulder. “You weren’t even born in 1970.”

Tim wanders back. “Yes, how dare you be young?” he says.

He puts one hand on the small of my back. I want to tell him to leave it there forever. I want to tell him to take it back, and not once more tonight remind me that there are creature comforts, waiting like quicksand, to be sunk into. Excuse me. Into which to be sunk. Except I can’t sink. Jongé said so. Tonight I must be one with the art.

“What if you have to use the bathroom?” Tim whispers.

He really doesn’t need to whisper. No one is close by. No one is checking out the fusion that is my art and myself.

“He said to go before the show started.”

“It’s a four-hour event.”

“Don’t remind me.”

Tim shakes his head in disgust. “Shades of my mother.”

And, at the exact moment he says the word mother, I see her. Not *his* mother.

That would be fine. I think. I’ve actually never met her, but it would have to be better than this. *My* mother. *Anything* would be better. Really. Anything.

“Shit,” I say under my breath. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Tim is going on about Jongé. “What kind of name is Jongé, anyway? How much do you want to bet his birth certificate says Norman? Or John? You think Jongé is Artspeak for John?”

My head is swimming, and the world—if indeed this is really it—has become dreamlike. Disjointedly, I think, Why didn’t you ask him yourself back when you two were an item? But that didn’t last long, by Tim’s recounting of events. Just long enough to get me into this gallery showing after the fact, which, it suddenly hits me, is synonymous with being in over my head. I don’t belong here. I’m out of my league here. I should have seen that before it was too late. Which it now is.

My parents are wandering in the opposite direction, scouring the walls with their eyes, seeking my work. They have not yet spotted me. But they will.

“Fuck,” I say. A little louder.

Tim is saying other things, and I’m missing them. Until the slightly louder fuck. Then he halts whatever conversational direction he was traveling and says, “Use your words, Brian.”

“Fuck is a word.”

“Use better words. Ones that actually convey the source of your distress.”

“My parents are here.”

Tim, who has a comeback for everything, has no comeback for that.

There’s been no time to accuse myself of making too big a deal about my parents unexpectedly showing up. If there had been, the look on Tim’s face in this moment would prove me wrong. The deal I’m making about it is just right. Just exactly big enough.

“Where?”

“Far wall. Green coat, artificially red hair. With the very tall, heavy, bear-like man.”

“So that’s the mom and dad you’ve told me so little about.”

“From a distance. Whole other ball game up close.”

He checks again to be sure they aren’t looking, then kisses me quickly on the cheek. “Bye,” he says.

I watch him stride away, feeling what could possibly be my entire gastrointestinal tract following him, as though attached, one long strand peeling away at a time. At first I assume he’s going home. But he stops at the wall of the only female exhibitor, looks over his shoulder at me, and winks.

My mom has spotted me. She grabs the sleeve of my father’s coat and begins parting the sea of LGBT art connoisseurs, buyers, and critics. She has locked and loaded. I am her prey.

My phone buzzes. I ignore it. Then I look over and see that Tim is on his

phone, and trying to catch my eye. So I answer as fast as I can, before the Familial Invasion lands and debarks on my beach.

"I'm so sorry," I say, all in a rush.

"For what?"

"Not being ready to introduce you to them."

"Brian," he says. "You didn't tell me to run. I ran voluntarily."

I had assumed responsibility somehow. How like me.

"But you're so..." He is. So. But I can't sum up precisely what.

"Out and proud, rather than your signature half-out self?"

"Something like that," I say.

I'm out of time. The invasion has landed. I hold up one finger, indicating I can't quite get off the phone just yet.

Tim says, "I didn't say I wanted to meet your parents and pretend to be straight. I want to postpone meeting them entirely. And *I'm* sorry. I'll be ready someday. Just not tonight. I'm not prepared. You said they couldn't make it tonight. You said they had to visit your Uncle Mo in New Jersey. That it'd been arranged for...I don't know...years or something."

"Yes. I did say that, working with the information at hand. Forgetting that everything changes. That life is inherently unpredictable. Look. I have to go. My parents are here."

"Quelle surprise," he says lightly, then clicks off the line.

"Mom," I say. "Dad."

Neither one is looking at me. They are both looking at my most outrageous,



most “out” piece of art. Then their eyes skitter over each additional piece, slightly out of kilter with one another. They look every bit as happy to see my art as I am to see them. Not that they’ve never seen my art. Not that they’ve never come to a showing. But not this art. Not this showing.

“I thought you were having dinner at Uncle Mo’s and Aunt Tressa’s and you couldn’t possibly get out of it.”

My mother’s eyes break loose and return to me, and she dives in for a squishy hug. Then she steps back and holds both sides of my face, rubbing her cool palms back and forth against what Tim refers to as my Velcro beard. She doesn’t say what she thinks of it. She doesn’t have to. She’s made it clear in the past that all men should either “grow a beard or shave, but they have to pick a side.” Tim is pretty sure that’s why I half-grew it.

I glance over at Tim. He’s staring up at a huge abstract canvas, scratching his chin in that way he does. He’s never aware he’s doing it. If I point it out, he’s always surprised.

“We started feeling guilty,” she says. I look past her to see my enormous father studying his shoes. As though they’re morphing into something fascinating. “Besides, Mo is having digestive issues again. Tressa was thinking of coming into the city at the last minute to join us, but now she has to drive him to the gastroenterologist. She sends her regrets.”

I say the only thing I can think to say, even though it’s ridiculous. I say, “At eight o’clock on a Friday evening?”

“What?” she says. “Eight o’clock on a Friday...what?”

Her hair is so red it hurts. Me. I don't suppose it bothers her.

"What gastroenterologist sees patients on a Friday evening?"

"Well, somebody has to be on call," she says.

Is this really my life? It seems to be. But that would be absurd.

I glance over at Tim again. He has his back to me, his jeans fitting in that perfect way that makes it hard to move my eyes elsewhere. It's not even an overtly sexual draw I'm describing. Some things are just appealing to look at, so you don't want to stop. I force my eyes back to the disaster at hand.

"Do you know that boy?" my mother asks.

My face gets hot, instantly, and I wonder if that means it's turning red. Probably. It stands to reason that it would. After all, I'm a prisoner here. Almost literally. No matter what happens, I can't just walk away. So why would life not take this opportunity to really ladle it on thick?

I open my mouth and almost say, "He's not a boy, Mom. He's a grown man." I think better of it just in time. "Who?" I ask.

She points. "The one you keep looking at."

So, what am I supposed to say? Sooner or later they'll meet. She'll notice he's the guy I claimed not to know. She's like that.

Needless to say, I was betting heavily on later.

"Yes," I say. "I know him."

At that exact perfectly horrible moment, Leona swings by to say goodnight. I thought she'd gone home ages ago. She hugs me. She smells like champagne. Looks like it, too. Well. Like the combination of champagne and a person.

“Tim is *so cute!*” she shrieks, disabling my left eardrum. I’m learning something interesting about Leona. The more she drinks, the louder she shrieks. No, I take it back. It’s not interesting. Not even a little bit. “You are so *lucky!* No *wonder* I could never get your attention.”

And with that, she catches Tim’s eye—perfect timing—and blows him an expansive kiss. Then she wobbles toward the door, looking like a combination of champagne and stiletto heels. Not a good one.

I glance heavenward and say, in the barest whisper, “Well played. That should cover just about everything.”

Oh. Did I mention I’m an agnostic?

Tim is glancing at me, awaiting directions. Part of me is praying he’ll dart out the door and I can just catch up with him later at home. See? There I go again with my lapsed agnosticism. I sigh, more deeply than I have ever sighed before. I’m surprised not to see my own lungs hit the gallery floor.

I wave him over.

“Tim,” I say when he arrives. “This is my mother, Jenna, and my father, Grant. Mom, Dad...Tim.”

This is hardly a coming out moment. I told my mom I was gay when I was fourteen. She said she already knew. That she’d known since I was three. Sounds like getting off easy, but she also cried. It’s always a mixed experience with my folks. My mother told my father. I wasn’t there for the unveiling. She never volunteered how it went and I never asked.

Meanwhile she’s looking at Tim like he’s a dessert tray and she hasn’t yet

decided if she's too full to be tempted.

"You said there was nobody special," she says, to me, but without taking her eyes off Tim.

"Yeah, a year ago."

Fortunately, she doesn't ask often.

For a few wonderful moments, Tim is one with my art. So that I don't have to be. He's my proxy. I mean, I'm here. If Jongé happens by, I'm in the correct position. But Tim is giving my mom a tour of my artwork, delivering to her, one thoughtful speech at a time, the same background he's heard me recite all night. Another one of those moments that remind me why I love him as much as I do.

My father and I are standing close, not talking at all.

In the awkward interim, I wonder if the things I appreciate so much about Tim are anything I've ever shared with him. Does he even know I love him as much as I do? I've told him, but...*what* have I told him? Enough?

I look up at my big bear of a dad, who's making a point of people-watching. I can tell you for a fact that my father is not interested in people. Never has been, never will be.

I feel sorry for him, so I say, "I'll bet traffic on the Long Island Expressway was murder coming in."

His face lights up. I've given him a gift.

He tells me about it. *All* about it. I only pretend to listen, which makes me feel guilty, until I remember that he probably doesn't care if I'm listening or not. He

just wants to talk. I mean, seriously, does anyone ever describe a traffic jam for the edification of the listener? I'm thinking not. What I'm really doing, instead of listening, is watching my mother's lips. To make absolutely sure they don't move. Tim can give her the backstory on my art all night long and we'll survive. But if her lips move, there could be trouble. I might actually have to do something. I might have to wade in and save him. He would do the same for me.

A waiter—who, by the way, doesn't even look old enough to *drink* alcohol—comes around serving it. My father swoops a champagne flute off the tray and then deftly palms an empty into its place. I hadn't noticed it in his hand. The guy is good. At some things.

He watches me watch.

It feels too weird to say nothing at all, so I say, "Careful, or you'll end up in the passenger seat."

He hates my mother's driving, as would anyone either sane or sighted, but she's strict about the rules. On his third drink he forfeits the car keys to her. No arguments. No exceptions.

He smiles, or, anyway, tries to, and it breaks my heart how utterly miserable he looks. I think, So that's where I got it.

"Look. Dad," I say, and he tenses, sensing incoming honesty. "I know you'd rather be anywhere else in the world but here."

Just for a moment I see a barely familiar flicker of humor in his eyes. "Oh, I don't know," he says. "I'd rather be here than at the gastroenterologist's with Mo." Then, alarmingly, he loops an arm across my shoulder. And I realize this is not his

second champagne. Might not even be his sixth. "You know you're still my kid," he says. Then he takes his arm back. Suddenly. Like he only just realized it was there.

"Yeah," I say. "I do know that."

See, this is the problem with my father. He tries. So it's hard to fault him. Then again, he never quite succeeds.

I watch Mom's lips for a minute more, then look back to see Dad snag another champagne, artfully ditching the empty. A lifetime of practice pays off.

It's twenty minutes to ten. They're not gone yet. Except my dad. He's gone in the ways that count. He just happens to be standing here.

My mother cycles back around, Tim in tow. She looks all up and down my tall, vertical painted metal sculpture (not what you're thinking) several times.

"My goodness," she says. "My, my. My, oh my."

I want to say, Use your words, Mom. Better ones.

I say nothing at all.

"It's so..."

"What, Mom? It's so what?"

"Turquoise. It's very turquoise."

She bends over from the waist to examine its lower reaches. As if interested in how it's bolted to the base. But of course that's impossible. Even for her. Her butt looks very round in that green coat. Expansive.

"It's interesting how you've bolted it to the stand here," she says.

Over her back, I catch Tim's eye and clearly mouth the words, "Shoot me.

Shoot me now.”

She straightens up suddenly, just as my father reaches for another full champagne flute from the roving young waiter’s tray. With the speed of a superhero, she covers the distance between them, snatches the glass from my father’s hand, and downs the champagne in one long gulp. She points at the waiter as she returns his glass.

“This gentleman has had plenty,” she says. “Enough said?”

The guy snags my gaze, expressing something like sympathy, before skittering away.

My mother turns her full, inherently terrifying attention on Tim. “So, Tim,” she says. “Tell us all about yourself. What do you do?”

“No,” I say.

Everybody stares at me. Even me, to the extent that’s possible.

There’s nothing wrong with what Tim does. In fact, it beats the hell out of what I do. That’s not the problem. The problem is, with that first Mom Question I lose all control of the experience of this night. Trust me; I’ve known this woman all my life. I’ve lost a lot of control.

My father is pretending to look at something else. My mother is still staring at me. And blinking too much.

“No...what?”

“No, you may not interrogate my boyfriend. Yes, there will come a time when I’ll bring him around and you can ask questions. When we decide we’re ready.”

Yes, this a new me. No, I’m not sure I *can* explain it. Just that...if you can’t

walk away from it, you have to fix it somehow. What else can you do? Immodestly, I admit—only to myself, of course—that I’m proud of me.

My mother, on the other hand, is not.

“Well. That’s very nice. After your father and I came all this—”

But my father has her by the sleeve and is towing her to the door. “Jenna, for God’s sake,” he says, while towing. “Would you just let the kid breathe for a change? Come on. We’re going home.”

Then they’re gone. And, in the middle of this noisy and crowded event, the Earth is very still.

“So...that was my family,” I say to Tim.

“They didn’t seem *that* bad.”

“Uh... I guess they sort of aren’t. Until you get to know them. People usually aren’t...you know...*that* bad. Until you really get to know them.”

Just for a minute, I let out a little breath, a little stress. That wasn’t pretty, but it was survivable. I’m still here. Tim met them, and he hasn’t broken up with me yet.

One breath is all I get.

Jongé arrives.

He stands in front of me, looking me up and down like I’m a piece of art he’s already decided not to buy. “You seem tight,” he says. His bare scalp is so shiny I can see ceiling lights reflected. No exaggeration. Maybe he waxes it. “Everybody else is really melding, really in synch with the moment. But you seem tight.”

I open my mouth, but nothing is quite formed yet. What do I say? You’re



absolutely right? I'm doing my best here? Fuck you very much?

Before I can choose, he looks Tim up and down. Now, Tim he would buy. Then he storms away, leaving a trail of spent drama in his wake.

I look at Tim, and he looks at me. And we both start laughing. At the exact same moment. It just explodes. I plunk into a sit on the floor, and he sits with me, and puts his arm around me. Maybe all I really needed was to laugh. It's like a good sneeze, or scratching that itch that's been driving me crazy.

Tim says, "Did I ever tell you my nickname for him? I used to call him Miss Candor. Ooooooh, he hated that. I really think it's why we broke up."

"I hate this fucking night," I say. "Why can't I just go home?"

"You can. You can do whatever you want."

"Oh. Right." Amazingly, I hadn't thought of that. "Might not be a good career move, though. Except..." I'm about to say something. Or am I? Yes. I think I really am. "Maybe I don't even want to pursue this. You know. The art."

He leans away, like a longer view of me will help. "Where's that coming from? I think you're just tired. And stressed."

"Yeah. Maybe. No. That's not it. It's... What is it?" I feel it, but I have to get words around it. "It's not that I think I'm not good. It's that I think...sometimes... maybe I'm not good *enough*."

"And how will you know?" he asks. Without even missing a beat, he asks that. And it's everything that needed asking. If I don't try, I won't know. Ever. Perfect. He's perfect. "I take back what I said about this exhibition. I think it was just right, just what you needed. Somebody needs to glue you to the art. To the world. So you

can't walk when things get uncomfortable. So you have to stay and deal."

"Tonight's been a glorious example."

"It has, actually. I like what I saw of you tonight. Carry glue. Seriously. It's good for you. It brings out your best."

I try to laugh but nothing comes out. I try to take a deep breath, but it stays little. I want to say, I shudder to think this is my best. I don't.

"Tim, do I tell you how much I appreciate you? And why?" My phone buzzes in my pocket, and we both hear it. "That will be my mom," I say. I click the phone on. "Hello, Mom."

"Tim seems very nice," she says. "We want to have two of you over to the house for dinner."

I roll my eyes at Tim, feigning distress. Well. Half-feigning.

"Are you driving, Mom? Or is Dad driving?"

"Of course I'm driving. You think I'm blind? That I don't see what goes on around me?"

"Last thing from my mind. You're not going hand-held, are you?"

My mother is a menace even with both hands on the wheel. It's important to the motoring world that she add no stress to the system.

"I'm on the hands-free. Stop distracting me. I'm trying to invite you—"

"Yeah, Mom. I heard you. I heard the invitation. And I really want to thank you for asking to have Tim over to the house. It's very nice. And we'll take you up on it..." In my peripheral vision, I see his eyebrows pop up slightly. "...but probably not soon. It's a little new. There's a reason I had it under wraps. When we're ready,

we'll let you know."

Silence. Silence. Silence.

Then, "Two weeks' notice. Minimum."

And she hangs up.

My mother never says goodbye. Ever. It's like she's allergic to the word. She unburdens her last thought, then clicks off the phone. The uninitiated tend to be taken aback. I just figure it shortens conversations. It also allows her to have the last word, always

I look over at Tim. Sigh.

"To a fault," he says.

"Hmm?"

"Your question. You asked me a question. The answer is, To a fault. But don't stop."

I put my arms around him. And sink in. And it's warm, like a womb. Like someplace softer and safer than the world. Than this night. Than my life. And I could rest here forever.

But I don't.

Guess what I do? I shift gears. I get myself back into Be-a-Grown-Man Mode. Not effortlessly. Not without a few slight lurches and some grinding of gears. But I come back out into the world.

"You can go home," I say. "No reason for us both to suffer. It's really thinning out. Seriously. Save yourself. I'll be home in an hour."

"You're sure?"

“Positive.”

He pulls to his feet, then leans down and looks right into my face. His eyes are so soft and so real it hurts to look at them. He holds my head, firmly and gently at the same time. Kisses me on the forehead. I can feel the hot print of his lips when he pulls away.

“I’ll get Thai takeout and keep it warm.”

Then he’s gone.

But it’s okay. I’m stuck here. I accept that.