

Gravegirl

Ian Kent

He was coming home now, one and a half years later. Or not home. He only called it home because others called it his home. Each plane ride (the first from Delhi to Amsterdam, the second from Amsterdam to Vancouver, the third from Vancouver to Cranbrook) that brought him closer to it threw him further away from it. 'It' was a necessary abstraction. Feelings were overwhelming and they needed abstracting.

He delayed the third flight. For a week he stumbled the streets of Vancouver in awe of its strangeness. He was here, yet, stillborn elsewhere. Then, he met her. Before he saw her face, he noticed her darkly shaded unbound curls. As she turned, he stood and stared. She smiled, embarrassed.

"Can I... Can I buy you a drink?" He said, as embarrassed as her.

"Yes."

The smile remained and the curls bounced off his shoulder. He bounced too.

The next day the woven curls bobbed in the boat on the ocean. They bit his shoulder and the waves splashed them. They saw the seals but did not photograph them. She was outside everything; outside the village on that continent to the east, outside the feeling that did not fit; outside touch, outside place.

The cab arrived in the night. They were on the couch in the common room holding each other. They were the sole people in the room and stared out onto the empty tables and chairs. It was the room where they first met, people clambering everywhere and they were still and certain among them. She kneeled beneath the protective embrace of his arms. The bright light in the dark room shook him and he released her. He kissed her forehead—the only kiss he gave or received—promised to keep in touch, grabbed his two ruffled bags and rode to the airport.

Content at the departure gate, he sat, reading the e-mails he had ignored. It was where the death notice found him. It was a sigh like a languid flop of a seal. Her gelatin path and his ghost path colliding.

“I only knew him four months.”

“Drink this ginger ale for him and that will be all.”

The plane bumped.

“Put on your seatbelt please.”

“He would want me to drink booze.”

“Beer is five dollars.”

“I have no money. It has passed from me in the Indian heat. I slumped in it. And her, after it all, how can I – with her – her curls – and do you think she primps it everyday?”

His overseas earnings were spent across a continent. Now, he would glean from mother and father like he did in high school and the summers between college. Sleeping in his old room. His parents waking him every morning. Body supplanted. Childhood carousing havoc. Sesame Street pictures clambering walls. Stuffed animals drooping morosely. Insomniac waking never.

Dean had sent the e-mail. A previous mentorship; a past situated in the present. Hired by Alberta Sports and Recreation as a summer youth worker, Colm was supplanted onto a reserve sundered by an obvious highway, incongruous dirt roads, dying yards and wide, dilapidated houses. Decaying opulence on fallow yellow land; a browning and wrinkling banana peel. His sponsors kept him in the only place they could afford: the Elder Care Facility beside the train tracks. The tracks rattled twice a day—once in the afternoon; once in the early dawn. A rattling lady was next door. He never locked his door until, while he was away, she wheeled into it to steal a hanger.

In the morning, he called Dean. Colm had missed the funeral. He was mentioned in the obituary. Dean wanted him to visit the bulging mound of dirt; pay those fleeting last respects that are always owed no matter how often they are given. They are always given and they are always taken.

He called her. She had just returned to Calgary and she missed him. She had just mentioned him to her friends. He checked his bank account. He would spend his last to see a girl and a grave. Unfelt thought demanded it and sought images to assert it.

Principally, his job consisted of wandering the Siksika Nation gym, playing basketball with the youth. On one of his many straggled pass-

es the ball fell at the feet of Dean and Jay. They looked up from their scribbling, picked up the ball and met him.

The way they stared at each other. Sweat was his and hers mysterious.

Jay had one year of high school left. Dean had graduated the year before. Colm told them about his funding. They gave him their scribbles; they wanted a film.

He had only kissed her forehead. That was all.

“A zombie story,” said Jay, legging from plank to plank, “except the zombies can talk normal English like us and one zombie is the good guy. A zombie killing zombies.”

“Nothing better,” said Dean, sitting and listening.

“Just give me a script,” said Colm, “and the funding will come.”

She had taken one year of a Philosophy degree. When she failed the Introductory Philosophy course and the necessary requirements of Math and Science she dropped out and flew to Mexico.

They only ever gave him two pages. It angered Colm. “Most whims,” he would say, “fail. We cannot base our film on failed whims.”

She whispered in his ear, defending her meanderings, “Sometimes I feel like a zombie. I go where the blood is. It happens to be in you too.”

Images confused. Assertion dumbfounded. Nil to the thoughts that led him. Between the grave and girl he would stand and howl.

He arrived late. She was bent towards the dirt, weeding in a short brown dress. They swung in a hug, grabbed beer and drank. She pointed to her blisters and excitedly described her gardening expertise. When he told her, his cheeks wrinkled and his brow brimmed, not for the loss, but for the regret of the depletion of his feeling. After it was awkward, a little, not laughing, touching fingers.

He did not stay the night. Emotion sank, billowed beneath. Moment unhinged. He left late.

At his door, Dean beckoned Colm. They sat silently, changing channels on the TV, finding a forgetful movie playing its end. When the credits rolled, Dean stood and circled the coffee table, like Jay would do deep in an idea.

“The film, your film, my film his film, our film is a tribute to him. You gave him that.”

Response drained. It was only four months. All he did was fund the film. Money was money. Not life. Not that voice that says what is done must be done. Not that, no, not that. Just money. Now, the ‘just’ was a burden, instead of a moment of a memory of a dream.

“Its been two years.” Response hesitant.

“I know.”

“Where will I sleep?”

“On the couch.”

Colm set his bag and pillow beside it. Dean went upstairs.

Dean woke him early. He was kneeling beside the coffee table.

“You should have come to the funeral. My dad hitchhiked from Golden.”

Colm turned his ears into the cushions.

“I was on a plane.”

“I should have told you sooner.”

Even then, he would not have come. His memory of Jay was a mosquito: desperate, greedy and failed. That weight, that burden, was there but it shouldn’t be, it shouldn’t be his pain, it shouldn’t be his praise, it should be for those who coddled that ghost. He bit and sucked.

A horn honked. Dean stood.

“That’s me. I’ll be done by two. Call me then.”

Little else but to traverse stumbling time, meeting her for lunch.

“I knew my sponsors would dislike the film, all blood, all joke, all

gore, all magnificent drowning. Jay and Dean wanted it; they needed it; it was their hearts; we forget that; their hearts.”

“I would like to see it.”

“I don’t have a copy.”

They paid separately. He patted her shoulder; they parted. Colm called Dean. He met him sitting on the edge of the sidewalk. Climbing into the car Dean dropped two red roses onto the gear shift. Colm stared.

“Come on Colm, lets go.”

Unrealized drive, highway hinged lights passing blurring substantial sight and then Siksika, draped with the pale grass and poking houses. Road risen: the gym; the high school and the baseball diamond; a softball game in the midst; graveyard above it all on a lunging decrepit plateau, fenced off with thin metal twangs.

Dean gave Colm one of the red roses.

“You go first.”

“I don’t know where the grave is.”

“It’s behind that old bench.”

Colm turned his rose three-sixty. “Did I tell you about the girl I met?” Dean did not look up. “She lives in Calgary. I want to—”

“Please, Colm. Go.”

Colm climbed out of the car. He tried the gate; it was locked. His hands dangled. Permission needed to disturb the insomniacs. He waited, unsure; mosquitoes came in numbers. He slapped and jerked and leapt over the fence which shook the grass which shook the graves. He searched the graves behind the peeling bench one by one until the last.

Wind came. He let the rose rest beneath a wreath. Dean was a surprise beside him when the air turned. Tears shaking. Colm stepped away; wondered what the weight was and what it did to the shoulders. On the other side of the ocean, in the Indian village, Colm had a lack of weight. Returning, the lack of weight split and because it split it yoked him heavier. He tried mending. Listless mends do not mend.

Dean brushed dirt into his hands. He lit a cigarette.

“I dressed the body,” cigarette twisted between his fingers. “His cheeks were black; his skin was dry; his lip was pale. He did not move until I touched him.” He stood from his kneeling; he let the dirt fall.

Colm came close. “Jay died admirably.”

“It was a fire; he didn’t see!”

“In the film,” Colm said, raising his palms to his chest. “That last choke and smile: ‘you choke too, you son of a bitch.’”

“His line through and through.” Dean puffed last billow; dropped the cigarette; squashed it: decapitated tobacco offering. “His father is expecting us.”

“What? I—”

“Again, please.”

Across the highway and down a thin paved road. A green house and a dusty driveway. One silver truck.

The father sat watching TV. His wife was in his arms, protected in his embrace. On the wall was a blue blanket knitted red with Jay’s name. A dream catcher and an eagle feather were beside it. Below, were three pictures of Jay. Dean was in one of them. Immediately, Dean felt sick; he went to the bathroom.

Colm was left. His eyes could not rest. The father reached for him, a bottle in his hands. “Water?”

“Please.”

“Cup?” said the wife.

“No, it’s alright.”

A dog barked. The sister came up from the basement. She was carrying a dish of mashed meat. “I’m coming,” she said.

She hesitated beside Colm, “Do you want to see him?”

“Who?”

“The dog. He’s outside on the porch.”

“Oh.”

Outside, the sister pointed to the stained floorboards. Her short hair was straight and unruffled.

“Watch your feet.” She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Scruff-aye!” From the corner of the deck, the dog came running. She let it rest in her hands. “Jay wanted him named Scruffy but only if he could say ‘Scruff-aye’.” Colm pet the dog. Tongue loose, it panted. “People come day and day. His clothes and everything are still scattered in his room. They come to take them, anything, whatever is left of him. No. It’s his.” Her eyes turned from the dog’s, to Colm’s.

The silence was hers, meant for him. She rubbed Scruffy’s dusty ears. What he said was translucent.

“One night, while we were filming Jay drank the blood we made. I have a picture of it.”

“Here?”

“No, sorry, back home.”

The sister smiled. Her teeth were chipped. She touched his fingers.

“He always made me laugh.”

There was only one evening, of him and he, outside of the film. It was a late night at the end of summer. They were driving from Edmonton, after editing the film, struggling to stay awake. Dean was sleeping in the back. To keep from sleep, Colm said one word and Jay said another. Dog. Rabies. Rats. Mosquito. Blood. Guns. Burning. Marshmallow.

Stories flanked by deeper ones.

Wind pale. Mosquitoes rushed. She brushed; he stung.

“I was with my friends,” she said. “I heard the noise of an ambulance. And something came, something in me, like the sting of poison ivy. I said goodbye and went home. The house was dark. My cell phone rang.

“‘Jay! Jay!’” was all I heard. ‘Dad?’ I said. ‘Jay! Jay! Jay! Jay!’

was all I heard again. ‘Speak dad!’ I said. ‘Speak!’ And he told me. I screamed, woke the house. The lights were turned on and cars flooded the street all the way back to the highway.”

She pointed down the road. Clouds above the sunset. Glaring yellow. Red tipping. A car turned into the driveway. The father appeared on the porch, stepped down in his short thick legs, opened the car door and balanced the grandmother.

Light translucence; cumbersome steps; father unbalanced; grandmother balancing him; father rattled. His lips fattened, erasing his cheeks.

“You could see the burnt house from my window,” he said. “After the fire it still stood. Last night some kids burnt it all so I would never have to see it.” He wavered; grandma wavered. “I watched it burn.” He let go; tried to hold his hands; palm rested on Colm’s shoulder.

The father stared. The eyes of an Indian. “Thank you,” he said.

Colm pushed his feet up onto the bench and crossed them. He gulped water. He was a decaying broken blister. He apart, clinging onto what is not his.

Dean stepped out. He rubbed his stomach. “Let’s go.”

Colm lightly grasped the thin and draping fingers proffered by the elder. The other hands, he shook.

In the morning, he saw her for breakfast. What words came were inadequate. Bodies sufficed.



Ian Kent, author of “Gravegirl,” a short story we published in issue # 72, attended the University of Alberta where he attained his Bachelor of Arts (major in Drama; minor in English). After his graduation, Ian wrote and produced two children’s plays, “The Kingship of NNNNorp!” and “Witches’ Brew Carrot Stew”, at the Edmonton International Fringe Festival. Then, he traveled overseas where he worked in India teaching and directing Tibetan artists in exile Shakespearean acting techniques, while also editing and contributing to *Contact Magazine*. Most recently, He wrote, produced and directed the play “Abattoir Morning” through his production company or; theatre (ortheatre.com). His poems have been published in *Quills Canadian Poetry Magazine*, *The Prairie Journal*, *Scrivener Creative Review*, *Rhubarb* and *Contemporary Verse 2*. His fiction has appeared in *The Prairie Journal* and *Montreal Writes*. His non-fiction has appeared in *Rhubarb*.
