

## Jim's Invitation

I had not written to Jim, that I could recall, for him to ever send me anything in return. More to the point he passed away in 1980 so I thought the spidery scrawl on the expensive, semi translucent wedding paper envelope was some sort of prank. I had gone to bed, not at my usual late hour but at a respectable time. As I drifted off I realized I had not collected the mail for the day so I swung myself out of bed and walked outside. It was the only piece of correspondence in the box.

I suspected my glasses or eyes or both were misbehaving. But there was only ever one person who wrote like that. And it was old Jim. Intrigued, my fingers slipped the fold away from its gum. A pressed and dried clover flower fell out. You know, one of those large bold red ones, not the common pale white. That was clever. Whoever had sent this clearly knew old Jim alright. He loved his bees. I flipped the folded parchment open.

*"Dear Bruce" it read. "It's time to talk. I'm in my old club, but only after 11pm. It's too rowdy for a chat any other time. Let yourself in the side door"*. His old man's spidery scrawl signed it off in his signature black ink. I could hear the nib scratch it out even as I read.

I smiled to myself but was not at all sure. Only a visit to the club would tell who was pulling my leg. But when? Tonight? Tomorrow? It wasn't going to be tonight. It was far too late already, and I was in no mood to talk. I drifted inside and checked the time. It had just gone eleven. Perhaps I should wander down the street and see who was there.

The club looked shut down. The old heavy timbers doors with their brass fittings were solidly locked and I knew before I pressed tentative fingers on their dark shadowed lacquered surface the club was closed for the night. The occasional car swished up the street as I picked down the lane under the glare of a security light and tried the side door. It eased open. No alarms. I walked inside and could see a table lamp in the corner illuminating a shadow that bore an uncanny profile, one I knew well. He saw me hesitate and waved me over.

*"Come, take a seat. I know you like the deep leather. The tea is hot and the raspberries fresh. I know you like them both."* The quavery voice unnerved me but was reassuring as well. It was Jim, no question about it. I took my seat and peered closely into his shadowed face, eyes in shade thanks to his bushy white eyebrows and the lamp sitting high on a mahogany sideboard.

“Yes, yes, it’s me. But not as you think you know me. Indeed, just a few years older than you are now. Odd, but there you go. It’s how it is. Are you going to eat those raspberries? You and your brothers used to pilfer them from my garden so I know you like them.”

“You sent an invitation” I said, not able to touch the guilt fruit. You said it’s time to talk. You have something to say? A warning?”

He chuckled and eased back into the creaking leather. “Those raspberries are there because I know you like them, not as some cheap trick to make you feel bad. And no, it’s not I who needs to talk. You are the one that needs to do that.” I nodded. I knew all along that’s what he meant. From the moment I unfolded that stiff parchment I knew Jim was going to be taking me for a walk. For who else could? I picked at the raspberries and sipped my black tea then peered over the rim of the cup at old Jim who simply smiled back at me.

“It’s not the years that are getting away from me Jim.”

He nodded.

“I know, m’boy, I know” he murmured.

“It’s something else. Something I cannot measure or tap. Yet something that grinds me up each day and it only gets worse, never better”.

“Something syrupy and malevolently dark. Something that twists your insides and leaves you breathless? Something you want to run from perhaps, but cannot?”

“Exactly. It’s a sense of the shadow of something rather than the thing itself. Nothing tangible I can confront and put behind me. No dark, tangible threat, but the realization I am already standing in space over a fathomless hole, the bottom of which I cannot see. You can’t for the life of you work out how you got out here. And there is no path out of it.”

“It’s not just a hole though is it?”

I sipped my tea.

“No, it’s more terrible than that. It’s the dawning realization that there is all that potential of life out there which you will never taste or touch, or even watch from the sidelines.”

“Life?”

“Well lives really. People. People I am getting to know. People I have gotten too close too. People who in fifty years will be in their retirement homes or dead who have lived lives I will never know and realised dreams I have never seen.”

“But you have no claim on any of them. You can’t pretend to have any right to see those lines of life drawn.”

“Maybe not. But I was indulging a fantasy that I might see some, even if as a remote spectator.”

“But yet you know my grandchildren – all of them.”

I nodded, and knew what he was saying. Most of Jim’s grandchildren were born after he left.

“Did you live with that spectre, Jim? Did that not burn you up?”

His smile vanished. The nod was barely perceptible.

“I called it the black crow of old age. It sits on your shoulder cawing its melancholy in your ear, ready to gouge your eyes out if you don’t keep looking straight ahead. I hated it.”

“So you felt you had a right to see something more than you did?”

“Maybe, maybe not. I am not sure. At the time there were other things preoccupying me. Not those who were yet unborn, but those born who seemed so disconnected”. The table lamp caught a glint in his eye.

“You mean those who never gave you a second thought. Fancied you had had your fair innings?”

“No, though I can understand how many might be unsettled by that. We have a conceit that somehow the things we say and do will be bricks and mortar in the lives of others. But they are too often just the light lick of paint that soon fades or is painted over by someone else. It is a conceit.”

“It is. And that’s what churns me up. This is what keeps me awake at night. The realisation that my life is no contribution. Or rather, the realisation that I have no right to think I can make a contribution. At best I am some sort of vague

waypoint as others navigate the course of their lives. Soon lost in the blue gray hills of forgotten memories and the noise of youth.”

“Waypoint?”

“Sorry. Yeah, a known navigation point that helps you double check your bearing as you go.”

Jim slowly nodded, and dragged the back of his thumb across his forehead.

“I see. Yet maybe even a vague waypoint is better than none at all.” He paused, brow furrowed. “You know, maybe that is more than you should expect. You can’t inhabit their worlds you know”.

I throttled down a rising sense of irritation.

“True, but that does not help. If only a vague waypoint why bother at all? Why not chart your own course and let them sail on. Maybe there are other waypoints they are fixing themselves on, ones they prefer beyond me. There is the conceit – that they might use me as a waypoint.”

Jim put down his cup and leaned on his knees. I wasn’t sure I was making a whole lot of sense but he seemed tuned in.

“So is this black hole an anger?” he murmured. “Are you outcast?”

“It’s not anger Jim. But it could lead to it sometimes. A seething rage to borrow a worn cliché. But no. It’s a deep sadness that ambushes me with no warning. I can’t shake it off. I feel as if I am walked each day to a lake of tears but into which I am forbidden to dive. It’s a black lake whose icy depths have no bottom. I daily dream of drowning in a lake like that. It’s a recurring nightmare, forever sinking into something meaningless. My words, carefully measured out – okay, occasionally intemperate – flung away with no value attached to them. Offered up to those who might use them, who I hope can use them. And nothing happens. Or perhaps, to go right back to where I started, if they are used, are consumed at a time when I will never see them bear fruit.”

“Meaninglessness? Maybe that is what is grinding you up really?”

“Come on Jim you know that’s not the case. I have a surfeit of purposefulness. An overabundance of meaning. I have meaning oozing out my pores. At the core of my being I have meaning. But that still does not remove this darkness.”

“Like an airplane eh?”

“Huh?”

He chuckled. “Yes, like an airplane. An airplane is full of meaning and purpose when it is cutting through the sky. A single destination. Built to do one thing and one thing well. But it can be cut off in the dark, or in a storm. And when they are parked and switched off they can have all the purpose in the world but still be mausoleums”.

“And they can be filled with purpose and still bang into mountains.”

“True, true, but let’s not take the metaphor too far.”

I shrugged.

“So do I question my dealings with these people? Do I care too much? Should I care? Am I too emotionally caught up with them? Should I feel? I read of a doctor who would put on his “flat face” when dealing with trauma victims. I used to have a flat face too but have lost it and wonder if I shouldn’t make some effort to find it again.”

“Which is why I sent you the invitation. I wanted to hear you. But I want you to know I felt the same way. Maybe not with a doctor’s flat face but with an old man’s superiority, knowledge and aloofness. It kept most people away.”

“Is this the foolishness of old men then Jim? That we reel back, not from the abyss, for that has no terror. But from the realization that the longer we run the closer we get, yet find we are further away than ever? That we are rebuffed?”

“Maybe it is. I turned seventy and felt fine. I felt as if I was just getting going. Felt that all my experience was just setting me up to start something new. That I was ready for any fresh new thing with anyone who wanted to start a fresh new thing with me. But none did. They had no vision. No concept that a man with my years could be so clear eyed. I was on my own. That is the curse for you. We are wired to run forever but we are not able while on this coil.”

“But that’s not the darkness is it?”

He shook his head. “No, m’boy, that’s not the darkness. Or the sadness you speak of. That has its hoary roots in the fact that another generation raises itself up without any need of anything except its own vitality and you are left to make

your own way, with a raven on each shoulder. Stay focused on your own destination.”

“If you don’t mind me saying, that’s a pretty glum view, Jim”.

He laughed. “But isn’t that what you are feeling? Isn’t that what you need to talk about?”

I nodded and he scratched his chin as he continued, the rasping stressing his points. “Mark my words. You are onto something. As people get closer they get farther and farther away. See who touches you now. See who stays away. See who is polite. See who cares less. See who is intimate. How close are your friends Bruce? Soon you come to realize the most intimate things are those ravens on your shoulders warning you where to look, where not to look. Stay away from this, stay away from that. Don’t get too close to him, or too close to her. And maybe also that churning sensation as your toes touch the edge of that lake of yours but which can take you no further. These are the only sensations we are left with.”

“You laugh when you say that?”

“Sorry m’boy. Yes, I do. I guess because I resigned myself to it. Watched all those old buddies of mine stride with lives full of purpose past my front window each day. Long retired. Down to the post office and back. Too busy to drop in and have a cup of tea and eat some raspberries. “ His eyes twinkled. “Where are they now?”

“Old friends eh? Not returning your love perhaps Jim. Is that what the despair is?”

He shrugged, and lifted his cup to his lips, nursed with both hands.

“I think that is what the dark sadness is m’boy. Not the precipice we hurtle towards but the black ice of indifference we find ourselves on. Unable to stop. Half the time you don’t even know you are on it. And like all black ice by the time you do it’s far too late.”

His cup rattled gently as he placed it in the saucer, and settled them both on the table.

“That is the melancholy of my ravens Bruce. The melancholy of a love given but a love not seen. A love unappreciated until it is too late. Too late for you to do anything about it. Too late for anyone else to do anything about it. Know anyone

close who passed away and you regretted not saying anything before they did? That sort of love. Do you know what I am talking about?" The sparkle had fled from his eyes, replaced by a rheumy glare, his face finally turned into the full light of the lamp.

I nodded and felt bowed down. I excused myself and made my way to the bathroom.

When I returned Jim had gone and, though I had seen none in the club I guessed the stewards had cleaned away his cup and saucer. There was no sign of him yet a solitary raspberry remained on my plate. I picked it up and made my way across the plush, deep pile carpet to the side door. I pushed it open. Over a wide and vast dark sea red clover flowers floated, stretching to the horizon. As I watched they clogged with water, their lightness turned heavy, sinking and turning to faces I once knew then vanished into the inky darkness. The water lapped my toes and the wetness lent its dragging weight of sad centuries of lost voices to my limbs.

I popped the last raspberry with my tongue. It was as warm and as sweet as the first I had ever stolen from Jim's canes all those decades ago.

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