

Touching Jim

by Juhi Kalra

We moved to Corning that May not because it was essential he have this job, but because we both fell in love with Jim. My husband, because Jim was everything he thought he wanted to be: charming, rich, white. I, because Jim was everything I wanted my husband to be: thoughtful, attentive, considerate. Being none of those things was all we knew of ourselves and each other then.

Jim was ten years older than us. Short and stocky with a Marine's square jaw, blond hair turning white, and skin that had spent too many years in the Florida sun. It did not occur to me at that time that this complexion I adored, neither ruddy nor pasty but the perfect sun-kissed white, may have later cost him his life. Jim was the only person who asked my permission before touching my baby filled belly when we first came to Corning, and each time thereafter until she was born in July. He introduced me to key lime pie, and for this alone I would have loved him forever. It was an innocent time for me, and I was easy to please.

I wonder now what it would have been like to touch Jim. What would he have felt like under my tentative fingertips, grazing his rough hands. There were many opportunities to touch him, opportunities that I never took because I believed then that my life was written in stone. When I passed him a serving dish filled with the Indian meals he learnt to love; when he did the dishes, handing them off to me to dry; when he took my recently born baby from me, or helped swing my first born into the sky holding her by her 3-year-old arms.

In October I saw for the first time the celebratory symbols I have come to know well since then: the squat square building where both Jim and my husband worked was festooned with a giant banner all along one edge that read "LORDY! LORDY! JIM IS 40!" There was probably a party that Saturday at the local chi-chi eatery, but I have

no memory of it. Five years in the US had not been enough for me learn the gravity which was assigned to such milestones.

The call came on New Year's Day, which I assumed was for my husband to attend to a patient at the hospital. It was, of course, too late for the hospital then. I saw Jim on January 4th, laid out in an open casket at the church where his wake was held. His mother, a most ordinary looking woman, was repeating to anyone who would listen that he had died in the night between Eve and Year of a massive coronary, his 10 year old son waking up next to him, unable to shake him awake. I wondered who would care for this widow now, or for his orphaned son; for they were held together only by the man in the casket.

Jim's mother encouraged me to say my goodbyes. I reached over the rim of the coffin, tentatively touching Jim. I had never touched another man before, not in life and certainly not in death. He lay in the box bereft of all that I had known of him: the life, the laugh, the smell of cigarettes. I touched his shoulder, not knowing what to expect, if I had known to expect anything at all. It was akin to touching the Taj Mahal, which I had known intimately since my childhood: just as cold, just as hard, just as beautiful. There was no room for goodbye, only a distaste for death, and the knowledge of being alone.

That night, I clung to the warmth of my husband's body, and felt his shudders as he mourned the only friend I had ever known him to have.

