

Veronica Ross

Island Funeral

He had never become used to the shock of turning his head quickly and seeing the contrast between the barren rocks and the sky. It was all rock here, rock with large wooden houses, painted bright reds and blues, perched precariously on top of them. High above, sea gulls swooped down and up again, screeching heartlessly. Jonas King, failed poet, misguided writer, teacher, often felt moved by the loneliness and poetry of the village and island, isolated on the northern coast. Everything seemed to stand apart, assuming an importance it did not really have. The sky seemed so much nearer here, and wherever one went, one could hear the roar of the sea.

Today, the sky stretched above the rocks, white and cold. The weatherman had given snow on the noon news. Jonas thought of it with gladness, welcoming the change. Once in a while, the sun came through, thin and far away. Jenny's funeral was for two; it was one-thirty now and already cars were lining up on either side of the road. He sat in his car, waiting.

New cars — it had been a good year for fishing. Tall, gaunt boys in dark suits and women in bright catalogue coats and hats walked to the church, keeping to the sides of the parked cars because the road was so narrow. There was something already old in the boys. Under their youth you could recognize the features of the old men, weathered and craggy. The old-timers, the ones on pensions, weren't dressed up. It was bill caps and red-checkered shirts, specially washed for the funeral. Only the women seemed young, with strong, determined faces — women used to coping while the men were out to sea.

Jonas put out a last cigarette and got out of the car. A gust of wind shook him and he pulled his coat around him, the long city coat he had discarded for a hunting jacket. The snow was starting, a few faint flakes. Snow made the island seem warmer, less remote. The house lights shining at night made him think of the city. Sometimes then, he

missed it, the noise and confusion, the anonymity. Here, everyone knew you. They could look at a man and say: his grandfather was crazy, his mother was a good cook.

"Afternoon, Jonas," an old man yelled above the wind. It was Isaiah, a deacon of the church. "Sure is cold out today. Wind's blowin' nor'west."

"Yes, it sure is."

"Hadda light two fires this mornin'. These young folks can't stand nothin' like they used to. In the old days, we never had a fire in the church. Cold kept us awake, listenin' to the word."

He stepped aside to let Jenny's parents enter the church. Jonas recognized them from school visiting, Mr. and Mrs. Dowles. There was nothing to separate them from the rest of the people here. The father was a fisherman, the mother a hard-working housewife. It had been the mother who had done the talking on visiting days. Today she was sobbing, her hat askew, and her husband was holding onto her arm. Behind them the door banged a few times with the gusts of the wind. The church had a hollow attic, and the wind sang up there, a sorrowful, far-off lament. The church was cold, despite the oil stoves. The door swung open again, and Jonas heard the cry of sea gulls.

"They sure did a good job paintin' this place, sure brightens it up," Isaiah said, his voice changed, subdued, now that he was in the church.

"Yes, it's a big improvement," Jonas answered, taking off his boots and topcoat.

Behind them, the funeral director said in a hushed voice, "It's time."

The first thing Jonas saw when he went in, was the coffin, the big ornate box with satin lining, surrounded by flowers, the body inside, dressed in white. From where he sat, he could see no bruises or scars, the marks he had feared, from the stories he had heard, face gashed in, hair ripped out. She was Jenny, a pretty, serious girl, with long light brown hair, startled intelligent hazel eyes. One of the smartest girls in the class. Get away from here, he had told her many times, and spoke of college, travel. And now she was dead. Of course he had to come to the funeral: one of his former students — school was closed for the day. All his plans for her had ended with that dark crash on the highway.

Jenkins, the minister, mounted the pulpit. He was young, about thirty, just beginning to get fat, with reddish-blond hair cut into a dated brush cut. A Baptist with a hatred of the flesh. In his plump, merry

face, his eyes shone, zealous and fiery. He had invited Jonas time and time again to come to church, undaunted by his disinterest. And then, he had left him alone. Who knew? Jonas thought, perhaps he prays for me. People respected him; there were things they did not talk about in front of the Minister. A sign at the side of the church read: Offering last Sunday, \$12.39.

"Prepare for Death!" Jenkins thundered in the silence, pointing a stubby finger at the men and women. A thick silence fell over them. A small old man, holding his cap between gnarled fingers fixed his old eyes on the preacher. The women in the choir blinked sternly. The one young boy in the choir, a clerk at the bank, stared iron-faced at the back of the church.

"For Death comes like a stranger in the night! Prepare and be ready! There are men and women all over this village who are living dissolute lives, lives devoid of light, lives shrouded in evil. But, you, you, and even you! - you can be saved! Yes, my friends, give up your temptations and give yourself to Christ!"

He fumbled for his handkerchief and blew his nose. "But Death, if you are not prepared, is a foe. And you will surely have to pay the price! Christ saves, my friends! It is not for you, or me, for mere mortals, to say whom he will or will not save. But I warn you, prepare for Death. It may come one night when you least expect it. It may steal into your closed shutters and whisk you away. It may come when you are sleeping."

Death, he said, had come to the girl, Jenny, in an hour when she wasn't expecting it. He paused. They all knew what he meant. Not going to church, drinking, dancing, driving in a car with boys. In the front seat of the church, her parents sobbed, even the silent father, a sob coming from deep in his chest, a cough, his head swaying from side to side.

Jonas looked straight ahead, hearing controlled snuffles begin around him. He couldn't move, couldn't look at the coffin, and stared instead at the church he had so often been invited to: blue walls, panelling at the front, Bible pictures along the sides. Tacky, cheap efforts to preserve an old building. Near the ceiling hung a cracked electric clock, with a cord running down the wall to the choir stalls.

"When I see men and women drinking and smoking and swearing and playing cards and dancing, I think to myself: what if death comes to them tonight?" His voice dropped to a faint whisper, audible in the suddenly silent church. Even the parents were listening, afraid. He paused,

and then his voice rose to a new, high pitch. "Where will they be? Where will you be? Will you be ready for death? Look, my friends, at the offering of last Sunday. Twelve dollars. Is that all you can give to the Lord? And look at the attendance, fifteen people!"

The bastard, Jonas thought, giving them hell because they aren't contributing enough to his salary. His eyes drifted to the coffin. He was remembering telling Jenny about the city, her eyes glistening, sighing. She had come for help in math and French, the two subjects she "did poorly in". Ah, these local phrases. He would have liked to weep, not the controlled sniffing he heard around him and was embarrassed to look at, but real crying. He could not, would not, the minister's voice implying everything was all over. Talk of the devil, of hell, and then, a short talk about Jenny, a young girl caught on the threshold of life, so tragic, a terrible loss to her family and friends. And then, he announced a hymn. "Lift your voices up to praise the lord!" Everyone rose, except the family. The organ, ancient, squeaked and groaned. Then the choir sang alone, a little wobbily.

Finally, it was all over. People stirred in their seats, and began a procession to the front. Jonas found himself in line behind Mrs. Graham, a sensible, kind lady who ran the general store.

"What are they doing?" he whispered.

"They're saying good-bye to Jenny. Terrible thing, so young and pretty."

"Yes, dreadful. I feel awful about it."

She sighed and dabbed her eyes. She had been away to Boston as a young girl to work for a few years, and liked to talk to him when he came for his weekly groceries.

As the people came to the coffin, they touched Jenny's hand. Some paused, said a few words. "How come they do that?"

"Sshh, not so loud. They're touching her so her spirit won't trouble them."

"Do I have to do it too?"

She shook her head and turned away. When her turn came, she too touched Jenny's hand, but quickly, without looking. Jonas found himself staring at the coffin, at a young, set face, remotely like Jenny's, but smaller, pinker - the make-up, he guessed, seeing two grotesque spots of pink on each cheek. Thank God, no scars. Quickly, he turned away, hating the body in the coffin, the people, the church, the minister.

Outside, people were getting into cars. He hadn't planned to go to the

cemetery, but then suddenly he decided to go. The snow had really started, not the slow soft snow he was expecting, but a slanting, cutting snow, driven by the wind. As he sat in the car, waiting for the others to start, he felt the loneliness and barrenness of the treeless land press itself upon him.

The wind was blowing, moaning, crying as they stood around the grave. The preacher opened his book, his collar turned up to protect his ears. "In my father's house there are many mansions," he read. Sobbing mingled with the wind, a few sharp cries reaching above it. The hole was surrounded by a fake green carpet, semblance of spring and heaven. The funeral director pressed a pedal to lower the coffin a few inches. The flowers, piled beside the grave, seemed obscene in their colours.

Over, Jenny buried. They began to turn away, the parents last, both weeping loudly. Behind them, the coffin was lowered all the way, and as the procession neared the gates of the cemetery, they could hear the heavy thud of earth striking it.

In his car, Jonas knew what he wanted: a drink. It would be dark early tonight. He would sit in his room warm and cozy against the solitude. He had been here for two years. Newly divorced, he had driven his car east, jobless, with fifteen hundred dollars in his pocket, and the weight of thousands of dead words behind him. The city, his life, his writing, his marriage, his failures, had disappeared as he drove east, encountering villages and forests, rocks, the sea. Browsing through the newspaper in a cabin, drinking lukewarm beer, he had seen the ad: Wanted - Gull Island - Teacher for one room school, grades one to ten. Isolated location. Accommodations provided. Apply in person or write. He had "applied in person", having found the island on a map. He had traced the route in a green pen, and had started driving the next morning. When he got there, he had to wait for the ferry, never asking himself what he was doing. The island had appeared out of the mist, a lighthouse, a few houses bright and courageous. He had "presented himself". They had a meeting and he was hired: there were no other applications.

Except for his summer trips to a city two hundred miles away, he had lived chaste and alone on the island. He hadn't returned to his own city. A friend mailed his books, records, clothing. The island was dry; he had to go to a town sixty miles away, on the mainland, to buy liquor. His only indulgence, used sparingly, with comfort. Occasionally, on weekends he indulged himself more fully. Well, he told himself his contract was up this year; perhaps he would leave. But he could not imagine it, leaving.

Once here, he felt tied, unable to leave the rocks and sea.

And Jenny was dead. Go away, go away, he had said. In his mind, he recalled the things he had told her, changing, slowly, her outlook. The idea, here, was to get married to a fellow with his own boat. Together they talked, planning. It was all worked out. She would probably get a scholarship, there would be loans. Secretly, Jonas planned to give her money; he had saved most of his salary. And now she was dead, smashed in a car on a foggy night, buried beneath the snow.

When he got home to his room behind the school (accommodations provided) he turned up the oil stove, closed the curtains, and poured himself a tall glass of whiskey. All he could think of was Jenny. She had been going to school on the mainland; this would have been her last year. But it was to him she had continued to come for help, not the teachers on the mainland. When the lessons were over, she would close her books and they would talk. She wanted to know all about the cities he had seen and lived in: Toronto, New York, Montreal. He had sent for postcards and she took these home. He played his records for her, explaining the music. He lent her books. She was his creation. He often wanted to touch her, but he never did. Instead, he sat across from her at the table, talking in a low voice.

And now, dead. The whiskey was good, warming him slowly. Time to leave, he told himself. But could he do it, writing a letter to the school board? I am sorry, but for personal reasons. . . . He imagined his last day, the reserved good-byes, the ferry, watching the island disappear. Sighing, he put a record on: Schubert, the Unfinished Symphony. He opened his curtains a bit. It was getting dark. Along the path, he saw someone coming. Jenkins, the minister. He recognized his rolling, seaman-like gait, his long black coat flapping around his knees.

"Nasty night out," he said, when Jonas opened the door. Away from the church, his face was smiling, jovial. "Terrible day for a funeral. Good thing it was today. Another few days the ground would have been frozen. They couldn't have buried her until the ground thawed."

"A drink Reverend?" Everyone called him "Reverend" - it was like his name.

"No thanks. I don't drink."

"Some tea?"

"Yes, tea would be fine on a cold night like this. Had to walk, the roads are too icy."

Jonas wondered, as he made the tea, what had brought the man out on a night such as this. Another gaff - of course he wouldn't drink. Wasn't his wife President of the Temperance Society? "I like a drink now and then," said Jonas said, "especially on a cold night like this. I'm sorry, I forgot you didn't drink."

"Quite all right, Jonas. No need to apologize. Of course, you use it in moderation. You're used to it," he said, sipping his tea, man of the world. "But these people here, some of them drink to excess. They're not used to it. Why, I've known families, whole families ruined by drink. Men drinking up every penny, leaving their wives and children to starve. Terrible thing, drink."

"Yes, terrible," Jonas echoed.

The minister sighed and looked around the room. Jonas was quiet, waiting to be told why he had come.

"Well, at least the funeral got you into the church. I had hoped you'd come before this," Jenkins said with a little smile. "Terrible tragedy it was for the family. A young girl like that. If she hadn't been in that car — they were all drinking you know — she'd still be alive. Gone a bit wild these past months, but she would have cooled down. Gotten married, had children."

"She was the only one killed. The others were just bruised. I think one boy broke his collar bone. I can't understand why she — only she — was killed."

"The Lord works in mysterious ways."

"I suppose so."

"She was getting ideas. Her mother came to me and cried about it. Thinking of leaving, seeing the world, not getting married. Starting to drink."

"That's normal for a girl her age."

"Perhaps so, perhaps so. This is a different age. I have to keep reminding myself. Even here, things are changing. I hate to see it. Soon the young people will go away and they won't come back anymore. Some of them do go away, especially the boys. They work in factories in Toronto a while, but they're back, within a year or two, glad to be back where they belong. It's a good life here, Jonas, a good life. A hard life. But a man has an identity here, he's someone. In the big cities, he's no one at all."

It was almost dark in the room. Jonas thought he should put the lights on. He could see the minister's face luminous in the dark, self-righteous eyes, proud, regarding him with - what? - something waiting to be said.

"Why did you come tonight?" he asked. "Why tonight?"

"I was going to wait, but it was on my mind. And they wanted me to come tonight."

"Who?"

"The School Board. I'm the President, you know."

"Am I doing something wrong with the teaching?"

"No, it's not that. Your teaching's fine."

Jonas waited.

"There's been talk, Jonas, a lot of talk. That girl's been coming here, alone at night to see you."

"I was helping her with her schoolwork."

"Couldn't her teachers on the mainland help her?"

"I guess she wanted me to. I was glad to do it. I guess the teachers there are pretty busy — it's a big school. She was an intelligent girl. I don't know. It doesn't seem right, I can't get over it, her getting killed like that. So young, such a lovely girl. She wanted to go to university."

"Her parents are telling people she got these queer ideas from you, about drinking, getting away. Suddenly, her own weren't good enough for her anymore. She always talked about you."

Jonas spread his hands in a gesture implying, well . . . it would have been good for her to get away.

"There was a lot of talk, Jonas."

"She's dead now," Jonas said slowly, softly.

"There's something else. No one was supposed to know, just the doctor and Jenny's parents. And me, of course. But news gets around — the parents told all the relatives and now they're . . ." The minister was suddenly nervous, twisting his hands together.

"What is it? Tell me."

"Jenny was pregnant. The doctor did an autopsy."

Trapped anyway, Jonas thought at once, feeling shocked, disappointed. She'd never have left the island. She would have turned into a plump young mother, happy to have a new dress. And then, she'd have been like all the other women here. . . . A big wedding, fuss, then the sameness, over and over.

"They say it was your child."

"What? That's ridiculous, absurd, why, she was a child, she came

here for help with her schoolwork. That's preposterous! No!"

"They want you to leave."

"Look, I'll go and explain it to them. I'll tell them, speak to them. I'm not responsible, Reverend. I never touched her in my life."

"Of course, of course," Jenkins said, with his little smile. "You and I know that, of course. But they believe it. They're pretty angry, an outsider like you. They're all united against you. Frankly, it wasn't such a good idea, letting that girl come here at night. You, an unmarried man too. There was bound to be talk."

"But I didn't do it! It was so innocent, her coming here. What dirty, narrow, hard little minds these people have."

"Jenny told a friend of hers she was in love with you."

This fell like a gift on Jonas' ears, a present he hadn't counted on. "Look, reverend, I'm sure if I can talk to the Board, they'll understand. Schoolgirl infatuation . . . I didn't do it, I'm innocent. I'm not leaving."

"It's no good. You'll have to go. They made up their mind, they passed a resolution last night." Looking at Jonas, with his mouth open, his eyes dazed, he added in a purring voice, suddenly man-to-man again. "I know these people. They talk a lot. They're very isolated, they miss nothing of what goes on in the community. Of course, they'll let you resign. I'll give you a recommendation. Frankly, I often wondered why you chose to come here, to an isolated spot like this, you a man of the world. Nothing for you here. I imagine you'll be glad to leave."

"Jenny must have had a boyfriend."

"Jenny? Not that I know of. Perhaps she did. But it's you they're all riled up about. I'm afraid there's not much you can do about it. It was simply very poor judgement on your part to let that girl come here night after night."

"Well, I'm certainly going to go to them, tell them I'm innocent."

The minister smiled, and reached in his pocket for a letter, which he gave to Jonas. "They asked me to give you this. They'll want a letter of resignation from you too. My wife can type it for you . . . although I see you have your own machine."

"I'll type my own letter," he answered, glancing at the machine on his desk, the typewriter he was going to write another novel on, here on the island. It had stood unused, except for the stencils he had cut with it for school tests.

"Well, I must be getting along. The wife will be worried." He rose and looked at Jonas and shook his head. "I'm sorry Jonas. I wish your

departure didn't have to be in this manner. It's very unfortunate for you. For the island too - we'll be losing a good teacher."

Jonas watched him leave, stunned. It was all settled. At the door, he almost said, "Thank you for coming". Instead, he stood silently in his door, watching the man depart. It was still snowing — a real gale too, the wind howling and twisting the snow into swirls.

Over! You give up too easily. How many times had friends told him that? A marriage, a book, poems, jobs — all swept away, lost, as though they had never been. And now Jenny — and the island. Staring over the snowy island, lights gleaming in the distance, he thought of her. Lost in so many ways; to the boy, a gangly youth probably, with hands chapped from working with fish — some secret youth, a part of the island she was going to leave but could not escape; to her future, here on the island, years of sameness; to death, beneath the snow in the windy cemetery. Her gift of love, spoken of like an accusation by the minister, remained. It was something he hadn't expected. And that was lost too. He remembered her, sitting here, bent over his table, the light falling on her hair.

Sighing, Jonas opened the letter: "After much discussion and deliberation, the Board has decided. . . ." What about the contract, his rights? he wondered. What if he refused to leave? They would not send the children to school, he would be walking among the empty aisles, stepping softly among empty desks.

He went to the window and looked outside. The lights glimmered at him, united against him. He would miss it. Stopping on a city pavement, the memory of the fog and the sea crashing against the rocks, the smell of salty sea air, would come back to him, far-off, faintly echoing in his soul.

Slowly, resigned, he began to type his letter of resignation.